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WILLIAM J. DELANEY, *President and Treasurer.* S. A. FRAZER, *Secretary.* D. McILWRAITH, *Editor.*

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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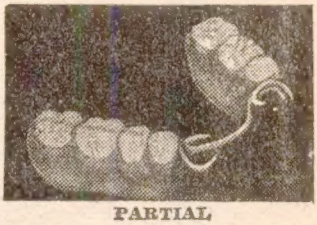

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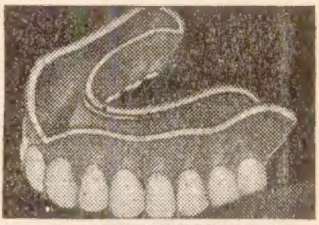

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GAMBLER'S CHANCE

By JAMES B. HENDRYX

Author of "Hard Rock Man" and Other Epic Stories of the North

The Silence of the North Guards Many Secrets

CHAPTER I

"NORTH MAN"

JACQUES RANCOUR rounded a bend in the river and halted his six-dog team with a sharp word of command. A mile ahead of him, on the long sweeping curve of the frozen surface appeared a dog outfit. Swiftly he shook the mitten from his hand, and withdrawing the glass from its case at his breast, focussed it upon the outfit—one man, evidently grasping the tailrope, running behind a sled drawn by five big Hudson's Bay dogs.

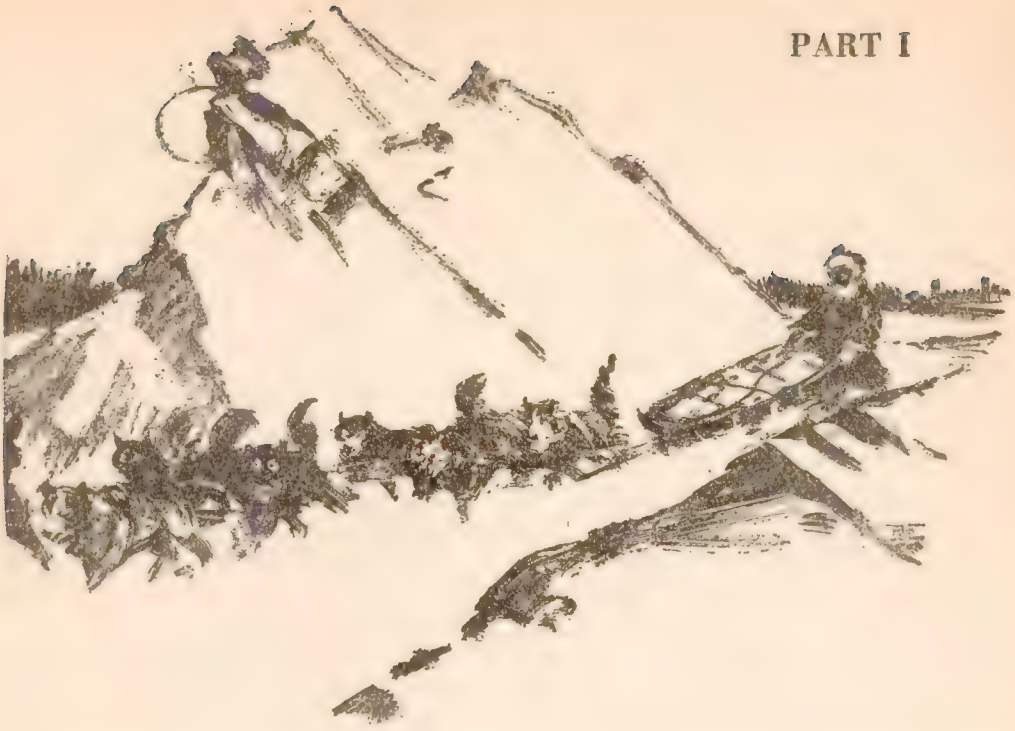
But why only one man? And only five dogs? For three days, now, ever since leaving The Pas, he had been following the trail of a dog outfit—two men, eight dogs, and a heavily loaded sled. Lowering the glass he strode to the head of his team and glanced down at the trail in the snow—a trail that plainly showed the tracks of two men and certainly of more than five dogs—the trail that had become so familiar to him during the past three days. And now, at the first moment he had sighted the outfit, there was only one man and five dogs! At some point between where he now stood and the outfit which was only a mile ahead of him, a man and three dogs had mysteriously disappeared.

As his brain sought an explanation, he raised the glass again to his eyes, and even as he did so the swiftly running dogs suddenly piled up in a hopeless tangle against which the sled stopped short. But what was even more astounding than that a free running dog outfit should suddenly pile up on a smooth, hard surface of wind-packed snow, was the action of the man who, instead of hastening to the struggling dogs, had thrown himself down upon the snow-covered ice beside the sled. And in that instant a sound reached Jacques Rancour's ears—the sound of a rifle shot. With the glass glued to his eyes, he saw the man beside the sled slip a rifle from its case, rest it on the loaded sled, and point it toward a ridge that rose along the left bank of the river. Then came the sound of another shot, and after a short interval, of several more.

Sweeping the slope with his glass, he finally made out a figure crouching behind the trunk of a fallen spruce close against the crest of the ridge. He could make out the rifle in the man's hands as he leveled it across the top of the tree trunk.

As Jacques Rancour watched this battle

PART I



a grim smile played at the corners of his finely chiseled lips. He had been warned that Trout and Stratton were tough men—hard characters who would stop at nothing to gain an end, just such men as an outfit like Duchamps would be expected to employ. But why were they shooting at each other? Had they quarreled between themselves? And had one of them taken three dogs and made for the ridge and attempted to shoot the one who remained with the outfit? It didn't make sense.

Even as he strove to guess the answer with his glass focused on the man behind the tree trunk, the unexpected again happened—a form sprang erect beside the crouching man, stood upright for a second with hands, one of which grasped a rifle, outflung, then pitched forward and rolled down the steep slope to bring up and remain inert against the stem of one of the stunted spruce trees with which the slope was dotted.

So there had been two men behind the fallen tree on the slope! Who then was the man on the river? Even as he looked, the crouching figure on the ridge leaped upright, stood for several seconds shaking his fist at the man on the river, then turned and scrambled up the slope to disappear over the crest of the right.

Whoever he was, the man on the river seemed to have won, temporarily, at least, his fight against odds. Focusing his glass upon him, Rancour saw him get to his feet, lay his rifle on top of his load, and hasten to his tangled dogs. Casing his glass, he again studied the tracks at his feet. But they presented no record of the third man with the five-dog team.

ROUSING the dogs which had sunk to their bellies on the snow, glad of the unexpected rest, he urged them forward. A quarter of a mile farther on as he passed the mouth of a river that swept in from the north, the riddle of the third man was solved as his trail swung into the other. Another half-mile, and the presence of the men on the ridge was accounted for as their trail, the trail Rancour had followed clear from The Pas, swung abruptly from the river and slanted up the ridge. Evidently they had seen this other man swing into

their trail a half-mile behind them, and had immediately hit for the ridge—but why? And why had they opened fire on the man who had held to the river? Again the grim smile curved Jacques Rancour's lips.

"I am the one at whom they thought they were shooting," he deduced, as he urged his dogs on toward the man who had paused in his work of untangling his dogs and was awaiting him, rifle in hand.

"Oh-ho, Rancour—so 'tis you!" the man greeted. Then, his expression assuming a sudden gravity, "I wish to God you'd got here a few minutes sooner. You could have got me out of a hell of a mess."

The other smiled as he recognized the speaker as a Hudson's Bay Company trader. "You seem to have done very well for yourself, Gordon."

"Aye—but 'twill go hard with me when news of this day's doin's gets to The Pas—with Trout's tellin' of it. After I got Stratton, Trout shook his fist in my face from the ridge yonder an' yelled that he'd come to my hangin'—an' the hell of it is, I'm afraid he will! I took another shot at him as he went over the ridge. I'm afraid I missed. If I could only have got him, too, I could have cut a hole in the ice an' dropped the both of 'em through. No one would have be'n the wiser—an' Duchamps could have thought what he pleased. They shot my lead dog, an' was crackin' down on me, when I opened up on 'em—but that won't be the way Trout'll tell it, by a damn sight! He'll claim I waylaid 'em. If only you'd be'n here as a witness. Your word would go against the word of a hundred like Trout."

"I was a witness."

"You was a witness!" the man exclaimed incredulously. Then suddenly he winked and smiled. "Damn white of you, Rancour—if you'll do it! You know as well as I do that the country's better off fer riddence of a man like Stratton. If you'll swear you was clost enough to see what come off, it'll save me. I'll give it to you straight—an' you can say you seen it. You see, if you don't—if I ain't got a witness to what come off, they'll hang me sure on account of me threatenin' to kill both Trout an' Stratton if they ever showed up agin north of The Pas with licker fer the Injuns—an' that's what they've got, three kegs of it. I wouldn't have shot 'em, of course, but I was drunk that night, in The Pas—an' I shook my fist under the nose of old Duchamps himself, the crooked old thief! An' I told him if he ever sent his men into the country with licker agin I'd kill 'em both! So now that I've killed Stratton, you can bet Trout'll go back an' tell how I waylaid 'em—an' old Duchamps'll back him up with his money."

JACQUES RANCOUR nodded. "I know Duchamps. He is the main independent competitor of the house of Rancour & Flandreau. I know that he is unscrupulous and ruthless in his dealings with the Indians, and that he would stop at nothing to gain an end. But even so, Gordon, had I not seen with my own eyes what happened here, I would not step onto a witness stand and swear that I had seen it—even though I knew that it would save you from being unjustly hanged. You, yourself, just said that my word would be taken against the word of a hundred men like Trout. That is because men have come to know that when I say a thing they can believe it—because it is the truth."

"Sure, but—how in hell could you have seen it? Here I happen to look around damn near ten minutes after it's all over, an' see you comin' hell-bent down the river—still so fer off I can't tell who it is."

The other smiled and tapped the binocular case that dangled by its thong against the breast of his parka. "At the distance of a mile nothing that happened was lost to me. I had my glass on you when your lead dog dropped and piled up your team. A few seconds later the sound of a shot from the ridge reached my ears. I know that the first shot came from the two on the ridge, and I know that they continued

to fire after you had thrown yourself down behind your load and fired back in self-defense." The man paused and stepping close to the loaded sled pointed to two bullet holes that appeared in the tarp that covered the load. "Their first shot was fired at your leader in order to halt you here in the open where they could be sure of finishing you. That their later shots were directed at you is plainly evident. And it is also evident that they were no mean marksmen. You were lucky to have succeeded in shooting one of them before they had time to separate and attack you from either side. You would have most certainly been killed. And with your body under the ice, no one would have been the wiser."

Gordon nodded. "Yer right, Rancour. An' I'm damn lucky that you come along when you did. Not only so I'll have a witness—but because I only had two more shells left in my rifle. I didn't expect to get mixed up in a shootin', and I didn't fetch along no extry shells. Trout's a tough bird, all right—an' you bet, if he hadn't seen you comin' down the river, he'd of stayed back of that tree an' kept on shootin' till he got me—an' it wouldn't have be'n long, neither."

"I believe they thought they were shooting at me," Rancour said. "They knew that I would be hot on their trail, and when they looked around and saw a lone man following, they swung to the ridge and laid ambush, hoping once and for all, to rid Duchamps of the competition of Rancour & Flandreau."

The other nodded. "Maybe yer right. They sure as hell couldn't expect to get rid of the competition of the Hudson's Bay Company by wipin' me out!"

"How do you happen to be here—at this particular time?"

Gordon grinned. "Same reason you're here. Not-a-way, one of our Injuns, was in The Pas the day Wa-ke-jik told you about Pak-quat's band of Montagnais tappin' some new trappin' ground an' comin' out with three times as much fur as they's ever trapped before. He knew dogs was scarce around The Pas, an' he figgered it would take you two, three days to pick up an outfit. An' he knew that old Duchamps had got holt of Wa-ke-jik an' got him drunk, an' that Wa-ke-jik told him the same thing he told you. An' he seen Duchamps start Trout an' Stratton out that same night fer Pak-quat's camp, with three kegs of licker on their sled, an' orders to beat you to Windy Lake no matter how they done it. So Not-a-way hit straight fer the Crooked Lake Post an' told what he know'd to McLeod—an' McLeod sent me hell-bent fer Pak-quat's camp to try an' get that fur fer the Company. He know'd you'd be after it as soon as you could rustle an outfit—an' he know'd Trout an' Stratton had a two-day start from The Pas—but we figgered I could beat 'em to Pak-quat's, travelin' light."

Rancour smiled. "So now the competition has narrowed down to you and me. Come, I will help you cut your dead leader out, and untangle your team. I can lend you a dog—not a leader, but one at least that can pull."

Gordon glanced up in surprise. "But—hell, Rancour! It's still three days to Pak-quat's camp on Windy Lake. What with me havin' only four dogs left—an' no leader, you could beat me by anyways a whole day an' have that fur bought up before I got there."

"No. Company competition is fair competition. They offer the Indians an honest price in honest goods. My only advantage over the Company is that I offer cash, and that I am willing to overbid because I am also willing to take a slightly smaller margin of profit. Come, we will get to work on your outfit."

The other stubbornly shook his head. "I'll be damned if we do! You go on to Windy Lake an' buy that fur. Everyone says you're the squarest of all the free-traders—an' now I know it. I sure as hell won't bid agin you on it. Not with you

standin' between me an' a hangin', I won't."

"Listen, Gordon—I seek no advantage for that. I am glad to be able to prevent a man from suffering for a crime of which he is innocent. And also to help convict a man like Trout—for if I am not badly mistaken, there is a severe penalty for an attempt at murder. That ambush was an attempt at murder, if there ever was one. Come, we are losing time. It may be that Trout will continue on alone to Windy Lake, and we must be there before him."

"Trout won't be hittin' fer Windy Lake this trip," grinned the other, pointing upriver. "Yonder he goes around the bend hittin' the back trail fer The Pas as fast as God'll let him. I'll miss my guess if there ain't a policeman waitin' fer me at the Post when I get back there."

"At least, you have nothing to fear from arrest," Rancour said. "But in my opinion you should continue on to Windy Lake, and put in your bid for that fur. McLeod sent you to do a job. Should you return with the job unfinished, he will want to know the reason why it is unfinished. He may even dismiss you."

"He'll know the reason, all right—when I get through tellin' him! An' then if he wants to, let him fire me an' be damned! But he won't. Old Mac's rough, but he's square. He knows you're square too—an' he'll say I done right."

RANCOUR shrugged. "Well, if you won't go on; you won't. If you are going back I will ask a favor of you. Wait until I write a short letter to my brother in Montreal. It is important, because if I succeed in buying this fur, the house of Rancour & Flandreau is going to have need of all the cash it can command—that is, if old Wa-ke-jik's estimate of the amount of fur Pak-quat's Indians have trapped this winter is not grossly exaggerated."

"Go ahead an' write. I'll take it back to the Post an' send an Injun on to The Pas with it as soon as I get there; that is, unless there's a policeman waitin' to take me down—then I'll mail it myself."

Rancour wrote rapidly upon a page torn from a notebook, sealed the flap of the envelope, and handed it to Gordon. Then he pointed toward the ridge, where the body of Stratton was visible, caught against the tree trunk. "I suppose we should go up and dispose of the body," he said.

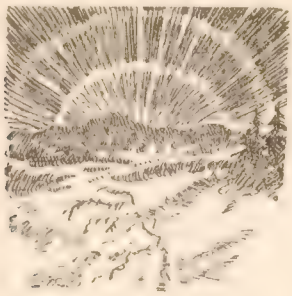
"Don't you bother about that," Gordon replied. "I'll go up an' have a look at it. If he ain't dead, I'll take him back to the post. I wouldn't leave no one to freeze. But if he is dead, he can lay where he's at. Damned if I'm goin' to haul no corpse a hundred mile with a short team an' no leader, nor neither I ain't goin' to dig no grave in this frozen ground."

"I think there is no question but what he's dead," Rancour replied. "If you are determined not to go on, I'll be pulling out. Good luck to you. Remember, you can count on me. I shall be at your trial."

AT NOON of the third day thereafter, Jacques Rancour arrived at Windy Lake and was admitted at once into the tepee of Pak-quat, chief of the wandering band of Montagnais. He was no stranger to this Indian, having had dealings with him before. Word went out, and one by one, the Indians brought in their fur for appraisal. All that afternoon, and all the next day, they came, bringing their fur. And as the last piece had been bargained for, Jacques Rancour knew that instead of exaggerating the catch, old Wa-ke-jik had under-estimated it.

So, with the promise of the Indians to deliver the fur at The Pas upon a certain date when he would meet them with the cash, Rancour took his departure the following morning. The snow held, and he made good time on the back trail. As he passed the spot of the shooting fray, he glanced up at the ridge to see the body of Stratton still grotesquely sprawled against the tree trunk. Even the wolves seemed to have spurned it. "Probably have an aver-

sion to eating their own kind," he muttered, with a tight-lipped smile. "Anyway, the North is better off for his passing."



On the last night out from The Pas he sat beside his little campfire, his pipe aglow. From his pocket he drew a thin packet of letters, and a photograph. Fondly he fingered the letters, holding them to the light of the little fire to allow his eyes to rest on the superscription—his own name in bold feminine hand-writing. Long he gazed at the lovely features of the girl whose eyes seemed to gaze back into his own. Helene—Helene Flandreau—only two or three days now and he would be with her—would be holding her in his arms—would feel the warm, moist pressure of her lips against his own—and then—only a few months—when the rush of the business was over until fall—she would be his!

His brows knit slightly as he pictured the pomp and fanfare of the wedding in the grand cathedral—at least, it would soon be over, he thought, with a wry smile. He had no liking for such ceremony. His eyes raised to the somber spires of the spruce trees, dimly outlined in the light of the little fire—this was more to his liking—silent spruce forests—long snow trails—a canoe in a white water rapids—dickering with savages in smoke-filled tepees—the wolf's long howl in the night time. He was a "North man"—even as Helene's father had been the "North man" of the house of Rancour & Flandreau until his death several years before. The girl knew of his love for the silent places—knew of it, and respected it. Even as he knew and respected her love for the lighter things of life—for parties and dances and brightly lighted ballrooms. Again his eyes rested upon the beautiful face—they understood each other, these two. She would endure his long absences into the North for fur—and he would endure her gay social world. And, in between, they would have each other.

He knocked the dottle from his pipe as the little fire died down. Carefully he replaced the letters and the photograph in an inner pocket, next to his heart. "She will be surprised when Andre calls her up and tells her I am returning so unexpectedly. Surprised, and I hope delighted. For I am not due in Montreal for nearly two months," he muttered, and slipping into his sleeping bag drew the flap over his head.

CHAPTER II

A LETTER ARRIVES FROM THE PAS

THE huge clock ticked solemnly upon the wall of the little office partitioned off in the corner of a warehouse on the Montreal riverfront. Seated upon a stool before a high standing desk with its row of old-fashioned files for letters and invoices, a little old man carefully blotted a sheet of finely penned figures, methodically wiped his pen on a patch of chamois skin, thrust the penholder behind his ear, and stepped down from the stool as he pushed the green eyeshade a bit higher upon his bald forehead. Crossing the room he placed several neatly penned sheets upon a roll-top desk before which was seated a carefully groomed man in his late twenties. The old bookkeeper waited respectfully as the younger man continued to read his newspaper. Presently the man glanced up impatiently.

"Well, Leduc—what are you standing there for? What do you want? Can you not see that I am busy?"

Leduc blinked behind his thick lenses,

fumbled at the penholder behind his ear, as he pointed to the sheets he had just laid on the desk. "The financial statement," he said, "that M. Jacques requested."

"Jacques! What do you mean! Jacques is somewhere in the North. As you well know, he will not return until late in April."

Leduc pointed to a pile of letters neatly arranged upon a corner of the desk. "The mail of yesterday and today. Have you not read it?"

"No, I have had no time. What is this statement Jacques is writing about?"

"Yesterday morning the letter came. It was mailed at The Pas. M. Jacques writes that he is about to obtain the fur of a band of the Montagnais who have been unusually successful. This, taken with the fur he has already secured, will be much more than we are accustomed to handle. We will require a much larger amount of cash than usual. Therefore he has requested that we get out a statement that he may take to the bank—a financial statement upon which he can arrange for the additional cash. He should arrive here tonight, or tomorrow."

"Tonight, or tomorrow! My God—what is this you are saying?" The man's face had gone pasty white, and Leduc noted that tiny beads of sweat suddenly stood out upon his brow, and upon the noticeable pouches that showed beneath his eyes. "And you have prepared this statement? Why did you not consult me? You know how matters stand!"

"I supposed that you knew. I placed the letter with others upon your desk yesterday morning. You were here at the time. I supposed, of course, you had read it. So when you left before noon without mentioning the matter, I went ahead and prepared the statement. You have not been in the office since."

"I had no time to read the mail. As you know, I was appointed chairman of the Winter Carnival Committee. Yesterday was the final day. I had a thousand things to do. What a day! What a night! I only just got up. My head is aching. See—how my hand shakes. And you come to me with a thing like this. What shall I do? Come—do not stand there like a mummy! You know that I have withdrawn the funds? What shall I do, I say?"

"I had no authority to prevent their withdrawal."

"But—Jacques will be here tonight!" cried the man, holding the hastily penciled sheet that was his brother's letter between trembling fingers. "Speak up—what shall I do?"

Leduc's eyes sought the huge clock up on the wall. "It is but halfpast one, M. Andre. The bank remains open until three. You have ample time to redeposit them."

"Redeposit them! You fool! How can I redeposit them? They are invested in mines. This Klondike—it is a wonderful chance to become rich almost overnight. Gold is being taken out of the Yukon in shiploads. By midsummer I shall be very rich. I can return this money I have borrowed two-fold—yes, even ten-fold."

"Well, then, when you explain this to M. Jacques, he will be glad that this good fortune has befallen you."

"Glad. Good God! Jacques glad that I have looted—er—that I have withdrawn the funds of the house to invest in mines. He will call it wild speculation—gambling. He will be furiously angry. He—he may even kill me!" cried the man in desperation. "He does not see things as I do. His vision is narrow. He sees only fur—and the traditions of the house of Rancour & Flandreau. He will call it embezzlement. He will have me arrested. I am ruined! I can no longer hold up my head in the clubs. I may even be cast into prison. Think of it—I, Andre Rancour, who only last night led the grand ball with the daughter of M. Conde upon my arm—Andre Rancour cast into prison as a common thief!"

As the man paused for a moment in his

hysterical outburst, Leduc suggested, "Undoubtedly you have friends who will be glad to lend you the money until these so great investments materialize."

"Friends! Think you I have friends who at a moment's notice would advance me a hundred thousand dollars upon the security of undeveloped mines?" He paused again, and with an embroidered handkerchief wiped the cold sweat from his brow. "Had Jacques not returned so unexpectedly, I should have had time to find a way out. But—tonight. My God—I must think! I must think! Why is it that when one needs most to think no thoughts will come?"

The old-fashioned telephone on the wall jangled and Andre started nervously. "It may be Jacques," he cried. "Answer it, Leduc. Tell him I am not here. I must have time to think!"

Leduc stepped to the instrument and spoke into the receiver. "No, M. Jacques has not yet arrived. Yes, M. Andre is here. One moment, please." He turned to Andre. "It is Mlle. Flandreau. She would speak with you."

"How did she know he was returning so soon? It seems that everyone in Montreal knows of it, except me—who am the most concerned."

"You would have known of his return, had you read his letter. You will note that in it he requests that you call up Mlle. Flandreau and tell her of his early return. I happened to remember that you left the office without doing so yesterday, so this morning I called her."

Stepping to the phone Andre held the transmitter to his ear. "Hello, Helene," he said, striving to make his voice sound natural.

"Oh, Andre, isn't it grand that Jacques is coming home so unexpectedly? I can hardly wait to see him. When do you think he will arrive? And I think you are horrid—not to have told me last night at the ball."

"I didn't know—" he broke off suddenly, as the voice caught him up.

"Didn't know? Of course, you knew! Leduc told me that his letter arrived yesterday morning. But I know—you wanted to surprise me."

"Yes—certainly—that's it. I wanted you to be surprised."

"You men, how you can keep a secret! Why, I would have been telling everybody. But—isn't it just grand?"

"Yes. It's fine."

"What is the matter, Andre? Your voice sounds strange—and you do not seem glad."

A sudden inspiration seized the man. "Listen, Helene," he said. "I must see you at once. It is very important."

The voice of the girl sounded suddenly brittle, tense. "Has something happened to Jacques? Has he been hurt? Is he ill? Or in trouble? What are you keeping from me"

"He has not been hurt. Nor to my knowledge is he ill. What I have to say must be said in private, lest it fall upon other ears than yours."

"Come at once to me. And, as you come, please be so good as to stop at the jewelry shop of M. Caudot, and pick up the ring I left there to have the setting tightened. It is a little ring Jacques gave me, and I would not want him to see me without it."

"I shall be there within the hour. Goodbye." Returning the receiver to its hook, Andre walked to his desk, seated himself, and for several minutes sat thinking, his eyes upon the statement Leduc had placed before him. Reaching into his pocket he drew forth a thin silver flask, shook it, and turned to the old bookkeeper. "Leduc, my flask is empty. I have need of a drink. Step to the corner and have it filled. Say it is for me—they know my brand of cognac."

When the man had gone Andre rose nervously from his chair and took a turn of the room. Pausing before the telephone he loosened a screw with his knife blade, opened the box, and disconnected a wire

which he twisted loose and placed in his pocket. Then he closed the box and returned to his desk. "There," he muttered. "Should Jacques return he cannot call her up until I have seen her. It is a desperate chance—but my only one. If it succeeds I may be able to cover up until the gold begins to flow in from my mines. Then I can repay that which I have taken—and all will be forgiven. I will be respected in the clubs. And upon the streets men will point to me and say, 'That is Andre Rancour, the millionaire.' If it fails I am ruined. But if I do not take the chance I am ruined anyway—so needs must."

When Leduc returned, Andre took a long steadying pull at the flask, returned it to his pocket, and abruptly left the office. After a few minutes' walk, he hailed a cab, stopped at the jeweler's, then ordered the man to drive to the residence of M. Flandreau.

CHAPTER III

ANDRE MAKES A CALL

TWENTY minutes later Andre Rancour was shown into the Flandreau library by Hawkins. Andre instinctively disliked Hawkins. He remembered that Hawkins had not always been a butler. In fact, the conduct of Hawkins as Helene Flandreau's butler had, ever since the death of M. Flandreau several years before, been a minor scandal in the eyes of Montreal's elite—a fact that was well known and regally ignored by Helene, herself.

Since when, men asked each other, had it come within the office of a butler to refuse certain gentlemen admission to the Flandreau mansion upon his own initiative —gentlemen who were received elsewhere without question, but whose private lives were the subject of much gossip.

And a story was bandied about the clubs that Hawkins had, over the telephone, firmly declined for Helene an invitation by a gay and rather naughty dowager to a week-end cruise upon the river. And that several days later, upon meeting him in the lobby of the theater, the irate dowager had haughtily told him that she thought it was a scandal that Helene Flandreau should employ a boor for a butler. And Hawkins had, with equal haughtiness, replied, "If I may say so, Madame, Mlle. Helene don't give a damn what you think."

Whatever the shortcomings of Hawkins as a butler may have been, one had only to glance at the erect broad shoulders, the long flat hips, the narrow waist, the cold, steel gray eyes, thin lips, and the lantern jaw to realize that here was a man to be reckoned with—one who would be sufficient unto himself in any situation. It was remembered in Montreal that, during M. Flandreau's lifetime, Hawkins had not been employed as a butler. He had been, during the last ten years of M. Flandreau's life, a sort of general factotum to the virile fur trader, who had been the "North man" of the house of Rancour & Flandreau, even as young Jacques Rancour was the "North man" now. It was he who had traveled the long snow trails, had battled hunger, and cold and whitewater rapids to wrest, by fair and honorable competition, a share of the vast fur business from independent traders, as well as from the two great companies themselves. And upon these journeys Hawkins had been his inseparable companion.

Many were the tales that filtered into Montreal of the prowess of Hawkins in times of danger and stress. It was known that M. Flandreau had found and employed him somewhere in the Northwest, where he was variously credited with having been a prospector, a prizefighter, a trapper—or what have you. Be that as it may, it required but one glance into the ruggedly lined face with the iron gray hair at the temples to know that here was a man of experience—and that his experience had not always been pretty.

Anyway, it was known that M. Flandreau swore by him, and that he trusted

him implicitly. That when he died, he had left him a substantial cash legacy, and reportedly had exacted a promise that he would look after his motherless daughter as long as she needed him.

No one knew these things better than Andre Rancour—and much of his apprehension since his telephone conversation with Helene had been due to thoughts of Hawkins. Hawkins was nobody's fool—and he had a look in his eye. And now, as Andre waited in the library for Helene, thought uneasily that the look in Hawkins' eye had been even more pronounced than usual as he had stood aside to allow him to enter—a look that was, somehow, half insolence, half contempt. Andre had often noticed that this look was altogether different for Jacques; for him it was a look of respect—at times, almost of comradery. He remembered once as they had entered the Flandreau mansion together having chided Jacques upon the impropriety of exchanging pleasantries with a servant—and that Jacques had brusquely replied that he had spoken to a man, not to a lackey. Andre sought to reassure himself with the thought that Hawkins admired Jacques because he was a "North man" and that he despised him because he was an office man. But he wondered whether this was the only reason. And the thought was disturbing.

His contemplation of Hawkins was interrupted by the sound of light footsteps in the hall, and the next moment Helene Flandreau stepped into the room and crossed swiftly to his side. "Tell me," she cried, pausing before the huge fireplace, "what is this thing of so great importance of which you must speak? Is it about Jacques?"

ANDRE wondered with a pang of jealousy whether a beautiful woman would ever be so concerned about him. The deep violet eyes were fixed upon his own in a look of consuming eagerness. Andre allowed his gaze to fall before hers, as sadly his eyes fixed upon the white bearskin rug. He nodded.

"Yes, it is about Jacques. As you may know, I have trusted my brother implicitly. Always he has had access to the funds of the house of Rancour & Flandreau—has drawn upon them to pay for the fur as he buys it. Imagine my surprise and my consternation when, this very morning, Leduc laid a statement upon my desk, showing that all the funds of the house have been withdrawn."

"But," exclaimed the girl, "that is because Jacques has succeeded in buying much more fur than ever before! Leduc told me that this morning when he called me to tell me of Jacques' early return. I asked him if Jacques were ill that he should be returning so unexpectedly. And he said no, that he had secured much more fur than usual, and that he was returning to make some arrangement with the bank."

"Yes, it is true that he has secured an unprecedented amount of fur, but that does not explain the disappearance of the funds. As a matter of fact, he has paid for no part of this fur. And the fur that he has already paid for could have been paid for with a tithe of what he has withdrawn. Leduc, himself, told me the reason—that of late Jacques has been withdrawing the funds of the house and investing them in mining properties, possibly worthless. He has evidently become intrigued with reports of the vast amount of gold that is being shipped out of the Yukon, and has invested heavily in undeveloped properties. To state it bluntly, he has gambled with the funds of the house."

"That is a lie! Jacques is the soul of honor. He would scorn to touch one penny that was not his own."

"I would have said the same thing, my dear Helene, twenty-four hours ago. But one is forced to believe when he is confronted with facts. In Jacques' desk I found the evidence of his perfidy. Papers recording mining locations, deeds to mining properties, reports of experts, and the like. Mind you, I do not say that these are worthless. In fact, many of them may be of great value. I only state that in purchasing them, he has used the funds of the house. And that now, when it is imperative for us to raise a large amount of cash, it will be impossible to do so—as the statement Leduc placed before me is decidedly unfavorable."

"I still do not believe—"

Andre interrupted her with a wave of his hand. "We have scant time for argument. The facts are as I have stated them. They are easy of proof—as this document will attest." Producing a packet of papers from his pocket he tore one from the top and handed it to the girl, who glanced at a deed to a mining location to which was attached an engineer's report. The deed she saw was made out to Jacques Rancour. "I would gladly turn all these over to you," he said bitterly, "except for the fact that if the house of Rancour & Flandreau must be forced into bankruptcy through this wild speculation of my brother's, the law will demand that these papers be turned over to the receiver."

"What—what can we do?" faltered the girl, white to the lips.

"I can think of but one thing. You, yourself, can come to the rescue—not only of Jacques, but of the house of Rancour & Flandreau as well. Your own private fortune is more than ample to cover this shortage. Should you turn over to me—now—at once—cash or negotiable securities to the amount of one hundred thousand dollars, I can immediately make good the shortage, and instruct Leduc to make out a new report which would be eminently acceptable to any bank for the further advancement of funds to pay for the large amount of fur Jacques has just purchased. I may state that in doing this, you are taking no personal risk. You cannot lose—even though Jacques' investments should turn out to be worthless, because you shall be repaid from the profit on the increased business. I suggest that you do this at once, as I shall have barely time to make the deposit before the bank closes. And I also suggest that you say nothing of this transaction to Jacques. Poor fellow—you know his pride, his exaggerated sense of honor. It would kill him to know that anyone save his own brother knew of his speculations. I shall not tell him where the money came from. I shall explain that I, myself, made good the shortage from my own private funds."

"But why do you not do just that?" asked the girl. "After all, I am not responsible. Upon the death of my father the house of Rancour & Flandreau was dissolved as a partnership, and incorporated. Jacques explained that he did this so that in the event anything should go wrong, my fortune would remain intact—whereas, if it should remain a partnership I would continue to be held responsible for the debts of the house."

"Ah, yes—that is very true. And I would gladly do as you suggest, but for the fact that my own private fortune has dwindled to a mere pittance, due to some unfortunate investments of my own. No, Helene, you, and you alone, stand between bankruptcy for the house of Rancour & Flandreau, and exposure—possibly prison, for Jacques."

Color flamed suddenly into the girl's face and the violet eyes flashed. "Jacques could never do a thing for which he might be cast into prison! Only will I believe this thing when I hear it from the lips of Jacques himself. You say that it would kill Jacques to find out that anyone but you knew of this thing. You are only his

brother, I shall be his wife! Should he tell he has done this thing, I shall back him with every penny I have in the world. But he did not do it. If anyone has embezzled the funds of the house of Rancour & Flandreau—it is you who have done so —not Jacques."

Still clutching the paper in her hand she turned and fled from the room, and as Andre passed Hawkins at the door on his way out, he once again became acutely conscious of the look in the big man's eye. And he shuddered slightly as he wondered whether the retainer had been eveasdropping.

CHAPTER IV

ANDRE RETURNS TO THE OFFICE

FOR nearly two hours Andre walked the streets, scarce heeding where he went. He had staked all on one cast of the dice —and had lost. His whole world was about to crash about his ears. He, Andre Rancour, man about town, known as a good fellow about the clubs, would henceforth be called an embezzler—a common thief! It was too much. He could not bear it. There was a pistol in his desk. One quick shot—and all would be over. Better a thousand times death, than long years spent in prison—and the finger of scorn pointed at him after his release. Sudden terror gripped him. He did not want to die. Yet he was afraid to live. Vaguely he wondered whether he could bring himself to press the trigger, with the muzzle of the pistol held to his head.

Murky twilight had settled upon the city, through which lights glowed dully. Abruptly he turned into a cheap café, frequented by artists, writers, and a scattering of nondescript bohemians. As he stepped to the bar he nodded casually to a man seated at a table, a green drink before him —Jules Gauthier, erstwhile a successful artist, a bon vivant like himself, of late fallen upon evil days and become a common drunkard. He frowned as he noted that the man was dirty, disheveled, with a furtive, beaten look in his lack-luster eyes.

Andre swallowed two stiff drinks in quick succession and departed from the place. Yes—he would have the nerve to press the trigger. His own end, should he continue to live, would be worse, even than that of Jules Gauthier.

A cold, dang fog drifted in from the river, enveloping the streets, swirling about hurrying pedestrians who appeared momentarily in the dull blobs of light from the windows as disembodied spirits, and disappeared silently into the murk.

He shuddered as he turned a corner of the warehouse of Rancour & Flandreau. "For the last time," he muttered hoarsely, and hurried on. A light showed in the window. Old Leduc—still working at the books. Well, he would dismiss Leduc, and then——

He stepped into the office to see, not the bookkeeper—but Jacques! Jacques, seated at his desk, his eyes upon Leduc's neatly penned statement. The man at the desk glanced up. Their eyes met for a brief moment, and without a word Jacques returned his glance to the papers spread before him upon his desk.

Andre crossed to his own desk and sat down. Minutes passed. Never had the big clock on the wall ticked so loudly—so slowly—so monotonously. Andre's fingers drummed softly upon his desk top. He could not shoot himself—with Jacques sitting there at his desk. That is a thing one does, only when one is alone. Would Jacques never look up—never speak? A sudden gleam shot into Andre's eyes. Why shoot himself? Why not shoot Jacques? Jacques was sitting there unarmed, and here in the drawer, almost within reach of his drumming fingers, was a loaded pistol. He would grasp the gun, and call out so that Jacques would turn to face him—so that he would not be shot from behind. No suicide shoots himself from behind. He would press the trigger—and then he

would place the muzzle of the pistol against the wound, and press it again—so that the police, or the coroner, or whoever should investigate the case, could plainly see the powder marks of a gun held close. Then all would be well. It had been a veritable stroke of genius—his carrying on his investments in Jacques' name. People would believe that Jacques had killed himself when his speculations had become known. He, Andre, would tell with great sadness of how, when he had confronted his brother with his crime, he had jerked the pistol from his desk, and before he, Andre, could make a move to prevent him, had held it to his head and fired.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly, his fingers moved toward the desk drawer. Jacques looked up, half turning in his chair.

"Don't try it, Andre," he said, in a voice hard and brittle as cut glass. "You couldn't get away with it. You couldn't even hit me—the way your hand is shaking." His glance shifted momentarily to the papers upon his desk, then centered on Andre's face.

"So—this is my welcome home after a winter spent in the wilderness bearing hardships that in equity should be shared by you. To find that the coffers have been looted. To find that those who have placed their confidence in the house of Rancour & Flandreau have been robbed. To find that a name that has stood for honor and fair dealing for more than a hundred years must now be dragged through the filthy mire of scandal. And you—a Rancour!"

"Listen—Jacques. I will repay all. I—"

"With what will you repay? I know that with your gambling, and your squandering you have lived up to the full extent of your income. But I believed that, being a Rancour, you would scorn to touch a dollar that was not your own."

"I have not squandered this money. I have merely borrowed it to invest in properties that will return the investment two—ten—a hundred-fold! I have invested it in mines. In the Yukon country—upon the McQuesten River—up on the Stewart—up on the Klondike."

"Mines!" snorted Jacques in a voice of withering scorn. "There is not a mine in the whole Yukon worth the name. They are merely placer propositions—patches of sand. Where one of them pays a fortune, a hundred barely pay wages—and a thousand pay nothing at all. You are a fool! From your manner of life I have known that you are a fool; until now I did not know that you are also a knave."

"Listen, Jacques—you have not squandered your money. You have a considerable fortune of your own. Lend me enough to cover this temporary shortage, and I swear I shall repay you. I will assign you a half interest in all my investments."

"I would not advance one dollar upon your oath, nor upon the security of your wild investments, even should you assign me the entire lot in full. I am a fur trader—not a gambler in worthless mining properties."

"Well then, give me time to raise the money elsewhere. I shall go to M. Conde and—"

"M. Conde is no fool. He is a business man—a banker—the custodian of the money of others. He would not advance one penny upon your worthless collateral."

"But I shall go to him and explain that you have this year succeeded in obtaining a great deal more fur than the house of Rancour & Flandreau have ever handled before. In this you can back me up. And I shall say that we therefore have need of extended credit. M. Conde knows us. The house of Rancour & Flandreau has dealt with the Conde bank from the days of our great grandfathers. He will not refuse us this loan."

"As I told you, M. Conde is a business man. He will not advance any money upon your worthless mining papers, nor will he advance any upon this financial statement that lies here before me."

"Ah, but Jacques, can you not see? That is a simple matter. We have but to

summon Leduc and order him to prepare a new statement—one that will show the house is in a favorable financial condition. One that, considering our reputation, no bank would refuse to advance money upon."

"What!" The word rang sharp as a pistol shot.

"Surely," cried Andre, "there could be no harm in that, because, even should these investments of mine be slow in returning a profit, our increased fur business would pay us out at the time of the London sales. We could thus obtain the money upon the security of our note of hand."

"And you would do this?" Under the withering scorn in his younger brother's voice, Andre flushed to the ears. "You would add the robbery of an old friend of our family to the robbery of those who have placed their confidence in the honor of the house of Rancour & Flandreau?"

"There are few stockholders beside Helene Flandreau and ourselves. They need never know—"

"Need never know! You would pile falsification upon falsification!"

"But, Jacques, think—if this thing becomes known, what will become of me? I shall be branded a thief. I will be expelled from the clubs. I can no longer hold up my head among men."

"That is as may be. Tomorrow the house of Rancour & Flandreau will go into bankruptcy. I shall personally make good any loss to our stockholders. No one shall lose a dollar. As for you—you can shift for yourself. You have made your bed—now you can lie in it."

"But—I—I may be cast into prison!"

The other shrugged. "You would be—if justice were done. However, inasmuch as no one will lose money, and considering that our stockholders are all friends and relatives of the families of the Rancours and the Flandreaus, there may be none who will care to prosecute you criminally."

"But I face social ruin! I will be shunned as a common thief. I can no longer hold up my head in the clubs."

Again Jacques shrugged. "Always you think of yourself. You have no thought of those who, save for me, you would have robbed. Get out! I never want to lay eyes upon you again. But before you go, look you upon those faces upon the wall!" With a sweep of his arm he indicated the portraits of departed Rancours and Flandreaus that were the only decorations of the office—austere portraits of austere men. "Those were good men—strong men, men of honor and integrity. It is no wonder they frown—as they gaze down upon—*a Rancour who is a thief!*"

Under the withering scorn in the other's voice, Andre rose from his chair and slunk toward the door. With his hand upon the latch he paused to light a cigarette. As his finger and thumb explored his pocket for a match, he suddenly looked up. "It is true," he said in a voice of abject humility, "that I spoke only of myself. But my thoughts were of Helene."

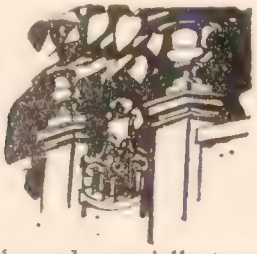
"Helene!" cried Jacques, snapping about in his chair. "Why should your thoughts be of Helene? What has Helene to do with this sordid matter?"

"Ah, my brother—you have been away. You did not know. We both feared that you would be hard hit by the news. And we have often discussed the most gentle way of breaking it to you. Even though you have been harsh with me, I even now hate to speak thus abruptly. But in all candor I must tell you that Helene and I were to have been married within the month. The banns were to have been first read on Sunday."

"You lie!"

"Ah, but I do not lie." He drew a ring from his pocket, slipped it onto his little finger and extended his hand. "See, we have exchanged rings in token of our pledged troth. Consider, my brother, how futile it would be for me to lie about a thing that could be so easily verified. I have always loved Helene, but I also knew

of your love for her, and I respected it. I held no thought but that some day you two should marry. I concealed my passion for her, and the pain in my heart as best I might. It was quite by accident, upon a night a month ago, at a gay party at the home of M. Courtade, that Helene and I repaired to a secluded nook for a brief rest after a dance. Concealing my own feeling, I spoke to her about what a fine husband you would make—so brave, and so strong—so honorable, and so kind and generous



toward all—and especially toward me, in going each year into the north and assuming the hardships of the business because I am not physically fit for such arduous labor. And she replied that all I said was true—that she had always admired you greatly, and that no doubt you would make a fine husband for some girl. But for herself, she said, she preferred someone who led a less strenuous life—whose business would not take him from her for half of each year, who cared more for the social side of life and the gayety of the city. She went on to say that her own father had been a North "man," and she knew what her mother suffered—knowing each time he left her that she might never see him again. She said that nothing could induce her to accept the worry of having her husband traveling a country in which death dogged his footsteps night and day, in which, should anything happen to him, she would never know the time nor the manner of his death, could never even be certain of his passing. And even though nothing untoward should happen, she would be doomed to be left alone during the gayest season of the year.

"It was then, and only then, that I told her of my own great love for her. And you can imagine my rapture when she confessed her love for me. We have spoken of you many times since that night. It was our desire to be married before your return.

"She loves you as a sister, and has often said that we must do our best to find some fine girl for you—one who is brave to assume the worry, and who cares less for the social life of the city.

"So you see, it was for Helene that I borrowed the money to invest in mines—that she might have riches. I do not pretend that it was right, though I shall certainly repay it two-fold. But your unexpected return has changed all that. Instead of marrying the most beautiful and the finest woman in the world, I shall be sent to prison, and both of us doomed to a lifetime of misery. Adieu, my brother. I go now to Helene—to speak the words which will break her heart."

AS HIS brother talked Jacques had gradually slumped in his chair, his face as expressionless as a graven mask. Andre noted the droop of the shoulders, the lack lustre look in his brother's eyes—and knew that he had presented a convincing case. As he stepped through the door, Jacques roused himself:

"Wait! As you said—I did not know. I must have time to think. What you have told me has disturbed me greatly. Do not go yet to Helene. I desire to be alone. Go to the *estaminet* upon the corner, and return at the end of an hour. I will by that time have decided upon my course."

As the door closed behind Andre, Jacques slumped deeper into his chair, his eyes upon the bare wooden floor. Always he had loved Helene Flandreau—and no other thought had ever entered his mind than that she returned his love. With her own lips she had spoken this love, time and again. Were her words but the passing sentiment of a heartless flirt? No. At those times she really believed that she did

love him—of this Jacques was convinced. But that was when they were together—and the nature of his business was such that for long periods of time—they could not be together. Would it be that then her love would wander? In disordered review, the events of his life passed before him—the moments of happiness with Helene—the rigors of long snow trails—the thrill of victory over competitors—the disappointments of defeat. His lips set, grimly. He could see the fairness of her position. She had seen her own mother endure the life of the wife of a "North man." She knew the worry, the uncertainty, and the heartache. She could not help her love for the gayer side of life. He could see these things—now that Andre had pointed them out to him. He did not blame Helene. His glance rested upon the telephone. He would call her up and tell her his heart held no bitterness toward her. But—no. It would cause her sorrow. And the sound of her voice, now that she was lost to him, would but cause him pain—would aggravate the pain that was even now almost more than he could bear. His glance shifted to Andre's desk. In the drawer, he knew, was a loaded gun. Was life worth facing without Helene? Grimly he dismissed the thought that had flashed into his brain. "The coward's way out!" he muttered. "I shall face what lies before me!" Life without Helene would not be as he had pictured it. No one was to blame. It was simply a case of two lives that did not fit together. He was glad that he had come to realize this before it was too late, before—but no, they would not have married. She had told Andre that she could never marry him.

Chapter V

Jacques Comes to a Decision

INSTEAD of stopping at the little *estaminet* to await his appointment with Jacques, Andre proceeded on to the Café Laurentian. Jules Gauthier was still seated at his table, his empty glass before him. Drawing up a chair, Andre seated himself opposite, beckoned to a waiter, and ordered drinks.

"Ha, my friend, it is a long time since we have met!"

The other scowled, and furtively concealed a soiled cuff within his coat sleeve. "*Oui.* One does not attend balls dressed in rags, nor does one frequent the clubs after his name has been posted upon the board."

"Only the other night someone was asking what had become of Jules Gauthier."

The waiter placed the drinks before them, and as Andre handed him a bill, the artist sipped at the green liqueur.

"So now," he replied cynically, "should another ask, you can tell him that Jules Gauthier has become an habitué of the Café Laurentian—an ill-kempt fellow, harassed by poverty, glad to accept a drink from any who will buy. But how is it that twice, almost within the hour, you should visit a place like this? Have you, also, been posted at the clubs?"

Andre laughed. "Ha, Jules—you were always a droll fellow! No, my name appears upon the board of no club, I can assure you. It is simply that the fog blowing in from the river had chilled me to the bone, and as I was passing this place the lights glowed warm and friendly through the windows, so I stepped in for a drink to drive the chill from my body."

The other regarded him with a twisted smile. "Your reason is, of course, your own. Your fog story would doubtless satisfy the curiosity of most people—but not one whose business requires that he study human nature."

"And this business of yours," inquired Andre maliciously, "does it prosper?"

Gauthier flushed. "No. But that is because I cannot control myself—not because I do not understand others. For instance, allow me to point out that one seeking shelter from a chilling fog would have

stepped to the bar and in a leisurely manner, have unbuttoned his ulster and thrown it back to allow the grateful warmth to more nearly reach his body. He would have sipped his drink slowly, and enjoyed the gentle glow as it warmed his stomach and coursed through his veins. In contrast to this, you entered the door, strode swiftly to the bar, nodding perfunctorily to me as though you scarcely saw me, downed two large drinks of whiskey, tossed a coin upon the bar, and strode from the room without waiting for your change. When one drinks thus, he is not seeking physical comfort—but mental. He is fortifying himself to do some act that he does not want to do—but knows that he must do. Am I right, my friend or—am I wrong?"

Andre frowned. "I did not return here to enter into a psychological discussion. I returned because I saw you here. I saw that to all appearance, you have fallen upon evil days. It may well be that my chance visit to this place will prove to be the turning point in your career. I may have some work for you to do."

"Some work?" Cynically, insolently, the artist's glance rested upon the speaker's face. "A commission, perhaps, to paint your portrait — that posterity may know what Andre Rancour, the gay leader of society looked like? Well—it could be done. The pouches that are beginning to show beneath your eyes could be eliminated. One might even catch the elusive, sinister expression of the eyes themselves, and the cruel cunning of the sensuous lips."

"Ha! Ha! You are indeed a droll one, Jules! This thing I may require of you is not the painting of a portrait. It will, however, demand a steady hand—and I see that yours is trembling."

Deliberately the artist held his hand before his face and studied the tremor of the fingers. "Ah, yes. This is my fifth drink. I arose only a few hours ago. I was very drunk last night. I worked very hard, yesterday. For eight hours, I helped a man carry bags of coal from the dock to his fishing boat, for which labor I received four dollars. With the tenth drink my hand steadies—and with the eleventh, I can draw a hair line as straight as a taut wire."

Andre smiled: "Evidently you have yourself well gauged."

"Ah, yes—the true artist studies himself as well as others. What is this work you mentioned?"

"I can tell you nothing, now." Taking a bank note from his wallet, Andre laid it upon the table before the other. "Here is money for the six drinks that you say will steady your hand. But do not continue to drink until you are drunk. If I have need of you, I shall return within an hour or two. If I have not returned at the end of two hours, you will know that I have no need of you — and you may become as drunk as you please. I must go, now. I have an appointment." He arose abruptly from the table, and as he buttoned his ulster, Jules Gauthier thumped upon the table for a waiter.

As he entered the office, Jacques gathered the documents upon which he had been working into a packet, snapped a rubber band about them, and handed them to him.

"You will find, here, valuable securities which I have made over to you. Also, you will find a note to M. Conde, which authorizes you to turn into cash, any or all of the negotiable securities that you will find in my strong box at the bank. And here is the key to the box. These documents, together with those at the bank, constitute my entire private fortune. I am not turning it over to you for your sake—but for Helene's. As for myself, I am leaving Montreal for good — now — this very night."

"But—will you not see Helene before you go?"

"No—no good could come of it. It could cause her only embarrassment, and maybe a certain amount of sorrow. And it would cause me only pain." He picked

up a sealed envelope from the desk and handed it to the man who stood with the packet of documents in his hand. "Here is a letter to Helene. In it I have advised her that the affairs of the house of Rancour & Flandreau be wound up, and the business discontinued. Without me it could not be successfully carried on. I have written McLeod a letter that will turn the fur I bargained for with the Montagnais over to the Hudson's Bay Company. In my letter to Helene, I have, of course, mentioned nothing of your dishonest withdrawal of the funds of the house. I have transferred my stock in the house to her, and requested her to see that the few other stockholders are paid in full. They are only a few, and their holdings are small. This letter is my last word to her. I can see that she is right in not wishing to marry me. Why she has chosen you—I cannot see. I have wished her happiness in her choice. I could not honestly congratulate her."

"Where shall I say that you have gone? Not only Helene, but others will be asking."

"Just say that I have gone into the North. I care naught for the life of the city. If I never return—well, the silence of the North guards many secrets — and will guard many another. If I should return, the explanation will rest upon me." He paused and his hard gray eyes narrowed as they bored into the eyes of his brother. "But mind you this—the fact that you receive no word of me will not mean that I am dead. Nor will it mean that I am out of touch with Montreal. Mind that you look well to the happiness of Helene! If ill befalls her through any act or omission of yours, I shall return and kill you, as I would kill a wolf! That is not a threat—it is a promise. And you know that I am a man of my word. Let not the passing of time give you any sense of false security. A year—ten years—twenty! If ill should befall her, I will return."

"But, surely, you cannot doubt that I will look out for the happiness of Helene!"

"Faugh! When have you ever given thought to the happiness of anyone but yourself? Think you I have forgotten that night when our mother lay dying, and calling for you, her eldest son, that she might see and speak to you once again—and you refused to come to her because you were winning at roulette at the club?"

"But—I did not know she was dying. She had been sick a long time—and many times had summoned us to her bedside because she thought that she was dying."

"You lie! Three times I sent Simpson to fetch you—and three times he returned alone, although he told you, in the hearing of others, that the two physicians at her bedside had stated positively that this was the end. Had it not been that she divined my intention, and kept me at her side, I would have gone to the club, torn you from the table by the scruff of the neck, kicked you down the stairs, and dragged you to her bedside."

Nervously Andre consulted his watch. "If all has been said, my brother, I shall depart. It is not seemly that we two, who are about to part, should stand here quarreling. Good-by, Jacques." He extended his hand, which the other ignored, as in stony silence he watched him stow the packet of papers into the pocket of his ulster, cross the room, and step out into the night.

"The gods are good to the resourceful," smiled Andre, as he turned his steps toward the Café Laurentian. "Only a few short hours ago I walked this street—my only thought to send a bullet crashing through my brain. And now, thanks to a ready wit and the willingness to take a gambler's chance—I am sitting on top of the world! You may not lose touch with Montreal, my brother, but you will never dare to return. For tomorrow you will be branded a criminal. Little do you know that all my speculations have been carried on in your name. I shall burn this letter

to Helene. But the one to M. Conde, I shall not burn. I shall turn all these securities into cash—and allow the house of Rancour & Flandreau to go into bankruptcy, because you have drained its coffers dry!"

In the little office, Jacques Rancour, drew a thin packet of letters surmounted by a photograph from his pocket. Grimly he fingered the letters, and for a long time he sat staring into the face that seemed to gaze back into his own. Then he replaced the packet in his pocket, stood up, and slowly paced the floor, his eyes on the austere faces that stared down at him from out their heavy gilt frames upon the wall—the faces of departed Rancours and Flandreaus. Good men—strong men—honorable men—all. Then with a throaty sound that was almost a sob, he threw himself into his chair and buried his face in his arms upon the desk top.

CHAPTER VI

JULES GAUTHIER WRITES A LETTER

ENTERING the Café Laurentian, Andre called for a bottle, and again seated himself at the little table across from Jules Gauthier, who was sipping at his interminable absinthe.

"See," said the artist, holding out his hand for the other's inspection, "this is the tenth drink, and you cannot see it tremble. With the eleventh, it will be as firm as the

Rock of Gibraltar. Since you have returned, I presume you have need of me?"

"Yes. It is but a small affair—a mere matter of business, that will require but a few moments of your time. But I will pay you well."

"Business?" Again the look of cynical insolence was in the dark eyes—brighter, now, having lost their lack-luster appearance. "A throat to be cut? A babe to be snatched from its mother's arms? Or possibly only some obscure markings to be placed upon the backs of a deck of cards? No thanks, my friend. I have no wish to risk prison in undertaking any business for which you would seek an employe in this place—and offer to pay well. But in coming here, you find yourself still one step too close to respectability. Listen, there is a basement down beside the river, but a few minutes' walk from here, called *Le Repaire du Loup,* The Wolf's Den, by those who know it best. There, if one may believe the whispered word, one may purchase even a murder cheaply."

Andre frowned. "Enough of this talk. I come here to help you, and you insult me. You say you have no wish to risk prison—well then, my fine fellow, you had best give heed to what I am about to tell you." Andre paused, filled his glass from the bottle the waiter had placed at his elbow, and downed the green liquid at a draught.

"Absinthe should be sipped," suggested Gauthier. "Not gulped down as the Americans gulp whiskey. It is a liqueur of character, to be sipped slowly, while one thinks. More and more I perceive that some weighty matter preys upon your mind."

Andre nodded as he refilled his glass, "Ah, yes, my dear Jules," he replied sadly. "You are indeed a man of keen perception. It concerns my brother, Jacques. I have only this day discovered that he is a thief—that he has looted the coffers of the house of Rancour & Flandreau. You may well imagine, then, that the sorrow and the horror of this discovery has subjected me to a great mental strain."

The artist sipped at his absinthe. "Yes. I can well imagine."

Andre glanced at him sharply and continued. "Not only is Jacques a thief—but a perfidious scoundrel, as well. He has this day admitted to me that he has a wife somewhere in the North."

The cynical smile again played about the lips of the other. "Since when, may I inquire, has the taking of a wife become a matter of perfidy? Allow me to point out that it is a custom indulged in by some of our very best people—a custom that has the sanction of both the Church and the State."

"But there is a girl here in Montreal to whom he is betrothed! A girl of beauty—of family—and of sterling worth. She loves him. And it has become my painful duty to go to her and tell her of Jacques' treachery. But it is going to be difficult to convince her of the facts, even in the face of his disappearance with the money."

"Disappearance? Has your brother fled?"

"Ah, yes. He fled when I confronted him with the evidence of his crime. It was then that he told me of this wife in the North—a wife who is a half-breed. Think of it—a Rancour married to one who is half savage!"

The cynical smile widened. "Ah, yes—but somehow the thought is not disturbing. I assure you, my dear Andre, I myself, have seen half-breed girls for whom I would sell my very soul!"

"But—you are not a Rancour," Andre replied haughtily.

"At least, then, I have something to be thankful for—knowing you, and hearing this news of your brother. But there is a thing here I do not understand. You say that your brother fled when you confronted him with his crime—and that he fled, taking the money with him. How does it come that you did not prevent him from taking this money?"

"Jacques is larger than I, and stronger. I am no match for him physically. Had I attempted to prevent him, he would certainly have overpowered me—might even have killed me."

"But we have here in Montreal an institution known as the police."

"Police! A Rancour pursued by the police! My dear fellow—it is unthinkable. Consider the publicity—the scandal. An honorable name held up to scorn. Ah, no. Rather anything than that. To keep this matter from the ears of the police, I am relinquishing my entire private fortune. I myself, am making good the loss caused by his speculations."

"One does not often meet with such unselfish sacrifice."

"It is nothing. It is of this girl I am thinking."

"Of her beauty? Or her family? Or, perchance of her *sterling* worth?"

Andre flushed at the biting sarcasm of the other's words, but chose to ignore it. "I besought Jacques to go to her before he left Montreal, and confess all—or at least to write her a letter—but he would not. It therefore, devolves upon me to make known to her the truth. But, knowing as I do, her great love for Jacques and of her belief in his honor, I fear that she will not believe me. So, therefore, I have sought you out. I know that, as an artist, you can imitate the handwriting of another. I have with me specimens of Jacques' handwriting. You are to imitate this writing. I shall dictate a letter to this girl, purporting to have been written by Jacques, in which he will confess all. Thus will she have confirmation of the things that I must tell her. For this slight service I shall pay you one hundred dollars."

Pausing, Andre selected several papers from the packet handed to him by Jacques, and placed them before the other upon the table. "There you have his handwriting and his signature. Here is a pen. You may proceed."

GAUTHIER drained the last sip of absinthe from his glass and cleared his throat. "I will not write. I know your brother, slightly. He once went out of his way to do me a good turn—when I was

a young man struggling for recognition. If any Rancour has looted the coffers of Rancour & Flandreau—it is you, not your brother. I need that hundred dollars. I need it for food, and for clothing—yes, and most of all, for drink. But I do not need it badly enough to pen a word that would injure one who has befriended me—and that might in some manner deliver this girl of whom you speak into your clutches. You see, I know you for what you are. Jules Gauthier has sunken low—but not that low."

Deliberately Andre withdrew a wallet from his pocket and selected from it an oblong of blue tinted paper which he held up for the other's inspection. He smiled coldly as Gauthier paled at sight of it. "Ah—I see that you recognize it, yes. It is the check handed to me one night at the club by Francois Lablonde in payment of a gambling debt. You remember that night—while you were still a member in good standing. It was your last night at the club. You were slipping, and you plunged wildly, that night, at the gaming tables—striving desperately to retrieve your losses. But you had no luck. You lost again—and paid your losses with I. O. U's. Next day, when you did not make these good, you were posted on the board—and your name was dropped from the membership roll.

"I remember that you were sitting next to me at the time Francois handed me this check, and that I slipped it beneath the stack of chips that was before me. The check disappeared—for being drunk that night, I must have been careless. A few days later it was cashed at a bank in Toronto, after having been apparently endorsed by me. How you succeeded in establishing yourself at this bank as me, does not matter. Your imitation of my signature is very clever — so clever that I myself, could not swear that it is not my own."

"Ah—then you cannot prove that it was not you who endorsed it!"

"You yourself attended to the proof. You made two serious mistakes. The first was in using your own fountain pen filled, at the time, with a peculiar shade of violet ink—the same pen and the same ink with which you wrote those I. O. U's."

"But that is no proof! Anyone can buy violet ink."

"Your second mistake," continued Andre, ignoring the interruption, "was the fatal one. It is evident that your pen leaked, thus besmudging your fingers and thumb. In picking up the check after endorsing it your finger and thumb left these prints that you may see standing out so boldly in that same shade of violet ink. It will need only a glance, my dear Jules, for the police to ascertain that those fingerprints are yours—not mine.

"I obtained this cancelled check from Lablonde. Also, I had no trouble in discounting several of your I. O. U's. Suppose, now, that I go to the police, and show them the evidence, and demand that they arrest you for forgery—what then?"

The artist stared stonily into the other's face. "You have known all along that it was I who forged your name to that check? Why, then, have you remained silent for more than a year? Why did you not cause my arrest at once?"

Andre smiled. "Why indeed? Perhaps I, too, desired to do you a good turn. The amount of this check is not overly large. I could not have recovered the money—you would have spent it before I could have produced these proofs. I am not of a revengeful nature. It would have profited me nothing to have had you cast into prison. Then, too—consider the fact that I foresaw that at some future time I might have need of one with your peculiar talent. Come—there is the pen—you will write." The man's fingers twitched upon his empty glass, as the color drained slowly from his cheeks. "In prison," continued Andre softly, "one may obtain no drink—no tobacco, even, that he cannot pay for. This hundred dollars will buy much drink. And writing a few lines with a pen is much

easier work than carrying bags of coal from a dock to a fishing boat."

Reaching for one of the documents, Gauthier studied the handwriting of the transfer notation. Picking up the pen, he made a few practice marks upon the back of an envelope Andre handed him, then he wrote, as Andre dictated:

Dear Helene:

Andre will explain all. I have indeed diverted the funds of the house to which I had access, to my own use, investing them in mining properties which I now fear may prove worthless. Also, I must tell you that we could never have married, as I already have a wife—a beautiful half-breed girl, far in the North. I am unworthy of you, my dear Helene. When this reaches you I shall be a fugitive from justice. Farewell. It is here our ways must part. I would have you blot from your memory forever the name of

Jacques Rancour.

When the man finished writing, Andre blotted the paper, folded it, and deposited it, together with the documents, in his wallet from which he drew some crisp bank notes which he tossed onto the table. As the artist's fingers closed upon them, he looked into Andre's face.

"Give me, also, that cancelled check," he said. "It has served your purpose."

"Ah no, my dear Jules. That was no part of the bargain. You have your money. And this check—who knows but that at some future time I may not again have need of your services?"

ABRUPTLY Andre quitted the café, and proceeding directly to his club, called Helene Flandreau, telling her that he must see her at once, as he had had direct word from Jacques.

A half hour later he was once more admitted to the Flandreau mansion by Hawkins, the servant with a look in his eye. The girl was waiting for him in the library, plainly agitated.

"Oh," she cried, "I know something is wrong! Or Jacques would have been here before this. Where is he? I have repeatedly called his office—but they can get no answer. What has happened? What is keeping Jacques away?"

Andre regarded her with a look of compassion. "I told you this afternoon, my dear Helene—and you refused to believe me. I come, now, with the proof of my brother's perfidy — which is far greater, even, than I thought."

"And with my ring?" demanded the girl frigidly. "Did you stop for it, as I requested? I would not have Jacques see me without it."

"Ah, yes—the ring. Yes, I have it here." Producing it from his pocket, he handed the girl the ring. "I overlooked handing it to you this afternoon, when you left me so abruptly. But as for Jacques seeing you with or without it, you need have no worry." Pausing, he withdrew a folded sheet of paper from his wallet. "I have here a note that Jacques asked me to hand to you. It explains all. But first—lest you receive too great a shock upon reading his lines, I must tell you a thing that shames me, even more than it can pain you. Jacques confessed to me that, somewhere in the North, he has a wife—half-breed girl who, he says, is very beautiful, and—"

"You lie!" The girl's voice rose to a shriek, and Andre nervously listened for footsteps in the hall — the footsteps of Hawkins. But he heard no sound.

"It is no lie," he hastened to say, extending the folded paper. "You may read it from his own pen."

Jules Gauthier had done his work well. The girl read the note, and without a word, crumpled in an unconscious heap upon the white bearskin rug.

Seizing an old-fashioned tasseled bell cord, Andre summoned Hawkins, who called a maid, and in grim silence showed

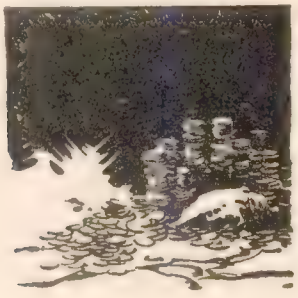
Andre to the door, with difficulty restraining his desire to kick him down the long stone steps.

CHAPTER VII

JULES GAUTHIER MAKES UP HIS MIND

IN THE Café Laurentian, Jules Gauthier refilled his glass from the bottle Andre had left on the table. Slowly he sipped the green liqueur. When the glass was empty, he refilled it. That check! This was only the beginning. As long as Andre Rancour held that check, the artist knew that he would not dare to refuse to do his bidding.

The incident of his last night at the club, long since forgotten, now recurred to him with vivid distinctness. Andre was drunk that night—drunk and riding a winning streak, so that every hand he held was good, every bet a winning one. And he, Jules Gauthier, sitting in the very next chair to his left, was consistently losing. He remembered the dull resentment that rankled in his brain at the ironical injustice of it—at the grim jest fate was playing at his expense. Andre Rancour, who did not need the money, who was too drunk to properly evaluate his hands against their probable chances of success, was raking in the chips and stacking them before him on almost every hand. While he, who so desperately needed to win, who was perfectly sober, playing cautiously, following the run of the cards, was losing.



He remembered that when Francois Lablonde scribbled his check and tossed it to Andre, and Andre had carelessly slipped it beneath a stack of chips—and had gone on winning.

The artist remembered that, hoping against hope his luck would change, he had kept on playing — paying for fresh stacks of chips with I. O. U's. At length, realizing that it was useless — realizing, also, that he already owed far more than he could hope to pay, he had slipped the check unnoticed from beneath Andre's stack, cashed in his own few remaining chips, and quit the game. As he left the club he had passed around behind the desk to the rack of pigeon holes where the members received notices and the mail addressed to them at the club, and purloined several envelopes from the compartment above which appeared the name of Andre Rancour. Proceeding to the bar, he had asked for the slip that Andre Rancour had signed for the last round of drinks, explaining quite plausibly, that Andre had bought several rounds, and that he himself wanted to pay for this one. When the bar man tossed the slip to him, he had paid the shot, pocketed the slip, and left the club—for the last time.

Catching the train for Toronto, he had appeared at the bank in the morning, forged an exact duplicate of the signature he had copied from the bar slip, and established his identity as Andre Rancour by producing the letters he had taken from Andre's box at the club, one of which was a receipt to date for club dues.

This had been Jules Gauthier's first criminal act—and he had suffered no qualm of conscience in committing it. Andre's winnings that night had been well into the thousands; he did not need this money—probably, in his drunken condition, he had even forgotten that he had received any check. Gauthier had prided himself that he had been smart—that by no possible means could his forgery be detected.

A year had passed, and the incident had been forgotten until this very night when Andre Rancour had suddenly appeared and

confronted him with the evidence of his crime. Such a little thing—a leaky pen—and yet, a thing that, in the hands of one like Andre Rancour, might forever hold the threat of prison over his head! Prison. Walls of stone and bars of iron. Whitewashed corridors. Little windows, also barred with iron. Ugliness everywhere—ugliness and endless routine. No tobacco—no drink. Again he emptied his glass, and again he refilled it, cuddling it lovingly against his lips.

He had done Andre's bidding—had betrayed a man who at one time, out of the kindness of his heart, had done him a good turn, possibly had ruined the life of a girl. It was loathsome, and vile, and so contemptible—this thing that he had done. But—it had kept him out of prison. However, with the check still in Andre's possession—the next thing Andre should demand might place him behind those very walls he was seeking to avoid. The strong liqueur was taking hold. He would kill Andre Rancour! Kill him, and thus rid himself forever from the threat that Andre held over his head. Thus does one crime inevitably lead to another. From forgery to forgery, and then to murder. But this time there must be no bungling—no inky fingerprints that would tell the police even plainer than words that it was Jules Gauthier who killed this man.

Somewhere along the riverfront—somewhere between the Café Laurentian and the miserable room he called home, was the warehouse and office of Rancour & Flandreau.

He remembered to have noticed the faded and wind-battered sign that proclaimed the dealers in fur. With Jacques gone, Andre's duties would be heavier. From now on he would of necessity remain later at the office. And with darkness still descending early over the city—darkness and the thick enblanketing fog that drifted in from the river, one might lie in wait at some dark corner of the unfrequented streets, and with the blow of a stout club or the noiseless thrust of a knife rid himself forever of the threat of prison.

The bottle of absinthe on the table was still more than half full. Gauthier replaced the cork and thrust it into his pocket. He was becoming drunk. He had no wish to go to sleep in this place and have someone rifle his pockets of the crisp new bank notes Andre had passed to him, and purloin this bottle. He would go to his room and finish it there behind his locked door. And in passing along the riverfront, he would search for the sign of Rancour & Flandreau, and would take note of the nearby corners, and of any likely places of concealment where a man might wait for his enemy to pass in the darkness.

Eyes staring straight before him, he lurched from the room. Cold, clammy fog drifted in from the river, and he paused momentarily to draw his threadbare collar more closely about his throat. The chill air partially cleared his befogged brain. As he passed along the ill-lighted street, he scanned the long rows of dark walls—forbidding, unlovely walls behind which men toiled throughout their lives for the unromantic supremacy of gold. Stolidly, Jules Gauthier wondered why this was so? Why should men eschew all that is beautiful in life for the purpose of amassing more wealth than they could ever hope to spend?

A light glowed dully from a window just before him. He glanced up to see, almost straight above his head, the faded sign of Rancour & Flandreau, dealers in fur. He halted abruptly. So — Andre Rancour had come directly from the Café Laurentian to his office. If this were so, he would still have in his wallet, both the check that stood between him and prison, and the forged letter that would not only injure the man who had once befriended him, but might forever wreck the happiness of a girl. The wallet was also fat with new, crisp bank notes like those with which Andre had paid him.

There was no time like the present—when, again, would he find Andre in his

office at this late hour, with the waterfront streets deserted and the darkness and the fog? A rare night for a murder—a night made to order.

Jules started, and a shudder shook his tall frame. The faded sign creaked dismally above his head, as a gust of wind eddied the fog about him. He would wait until Andre stepped out the door, until he stooped to fit his key in the lock and then— Gauthier's fingers closed about the neck of the bottle that protruded from his coat pocket, the bottle that was heavy, and thick, and still half full of absinthe. It would make an excellent club—the man would never know what hit him.

Nervously the artist wet his lips with his tongue. He would slip the wallet from his victim's pocket—and in the morning someone would find the body. The police would come, and they would say that this man was knocked on the head and robbed. But there would be no tell-tale fingerprints this time. He would hurl the bottle into the river. A man profits by his mistakes—if he is smart. The police would question all the thugs who were wont to foregather in *Le Repaire du Loup;* and maybe they would hang one of them—and that would be good riddance, too. And it would also be good riddance to put one like Andre Rancour out of the world. Almost as he stood there shivering in the night Jules Gauthier convinced himself that he was a public benefactor—ridding the world of undesirables!

The cold wind continued to eddy the dank fog about him. His thin clothing was but poor protection against the deadly chill that seemed to creep in and search out the very marrow of his bones. His mouth felt dry. With shaking fingers he withdrew the cork from the bottle and took a long drink. He replaced the cork. Why wait until the man came out? He might remain in the office for hours. Jules Gauthier knew that he could not remain where he was for hours—else it would be his own body someone would find in the morning.

Stealthily he approached the door and placed his eye to the keyhole. A man was seated before a desk, his face buried in his arms. Andre had taken one too many drinks.

He had reached his office—then sleep had overtaken him. Gripping the bottle in his right hand, he grasped the door knob with the other. It turned noiselessly, and with cat-like stealth the man slipped into the room and crossed to the sleeping man.

Chapter VIII

ANDRE INSURES HIS FUTURE

ANTICIPATING that his call upon Helene Flandreau would be a short one, Andre had told his cabby to wait, and now as he rode back to his club, listening to the monotonous *clop, clop, clop* of the horse's shod hoofs on the pavement, disquieting thoughts assailed him as he strove to plan his immediate future.

He would go to M. Conde in the morning and realize upon Jacques' securities. With these safely hidden in the secret wall strong box in the library of the Rancour mansion that he and Jacques had shared since the death of their parents, he could then go to M. Conde, and to the police and show them the various location deeds and other papers to the mining ventures he had carried on under Jacques' name, and report that Jacques had disappeared with the money that M. Conde had turned over to him, upon Jacques' order.

But this bit of news, taken together with the failure of the house of Rancour & Flandreau, would be spread upon the front pages of the newspapers—and if it should meet the eyes of Jacques, what then? Would he go into hiding—bury himself in the North? Or would he return to Montreal in the face of criminal arrest, and try to clear his name of the charge? Andre feared that he would do just that—and the thought was disquieting. The last thing

in the world that he desired was that Jacques should return.

He decided to withhold the news of Jacques' disappearance for several days, thus giving him time to get beyond the railroad. He knew Jacques loved the North —and had he not said that he would disappear there? Also the delay would prevent the police from apprehending him—giving him more chance to get beyond their reach.

But again — suppose Jacques should change his mind and decide to remain in Montreal? Thought of what would happen in that event sent cold shivers trickling along Andre's spine. He drew the handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his brow. "It is well that I put the telephone out of commission," he muttered, "else Helene would have talked to him—and my whole world would have come crashing about my ears."

He wondered whether or not Jacques had already left Montreal. Dismissing the cabby, he walked rapidly toward the river, and paused opposite the warehouse of Rancour & Flandreau. No—he was still here! A light shone dully from the window of the little office. My God—would Jacques never go? Suppose Helene should recover from her faint, and send the mighty Hawkins to the office to see if he was there? He stood for a moment with the chill fog swirling about him in the darkness and stared at the lighted window across the street. If only Jacques were out of the way for good and all—if he were dead—then all would be well, never again would he, Andre, have to worry.

He shuddered at the thought of having to live with the menace of prison hanging over his head—even as he was holding the menace of prison over the head of Jules Gauthier. Why not kill Jacques? He could walk into the office, and go to his desk as though he had forgotten something. Then before Jacques could prevent him, he could seize the pistol from the drawer, and kill him.

Suddenly, Andre realized that never until Jacques was dead, would he be able to draw an easy breath. But—also he realized that he dared not try to kill him. Jacques was shrewd, alert, powerful. Once before, only a few hours ago, Jacques had divined his intention—almost at the moment it had formed in his own brain. "Do not try it, Andre," he had said. "You could not even hit me, the way your hand is shaking." And standing there, Andre knew that this was true. Knew that he did not dare make the attempt.

But—ah—what was that Jules Gauthier had said—there in the Café Laurentian? "In this place you are still one step too near respectability. There is a basement dive called *Le Repaire du Loup* where, if one may believe the whispered word, one may buy even a murder cheaply."

With one more glance at the window, Andre turned and hurried down the street. Turning into a side street, he proceeded more slowly, his eyes searching for a basement door that gave promise of opening into this den of strongarms.

A figure loomed suddenly out of the fog —a huge figure, with hairy face and apelike length of arms. Coarse woolen trousers and heavy boots showed below the skirts of a long leather coat that was buttoned tightly about the barrel chest. A pair of intense dark eyes leered furtively above the black beard.

"Ah, my friend," Andre said. "Can you direct me to a certain rathskeller hereabout, known as *Le Repaire du Loup?*"

The bearded face was thrust close to his own. "Wot's a toff like you want in the wolf's den?"

"To tell the truth, I have no liking for the place. But—I have heard that there one may—er—hire a man for—for certain work."

"Wot's the work? You go dere someone'll conk you. I jest come from dere. I do a bit of honest work, now an' then—if the pay's right."

"Honest work?"

"Aye—honest work, fer honest pay."

"The work will take but a few minutes—and the pay will be right."

"W'ere is it?"

"Only a short distance from here. Upon a dark street, that at this time of night is deserted."

"Wot's the job?"

Andre hesitated, and the black beard was thrust even closer to his face.

"I say, wot's the job? I'll fire a buildin', crack a crib, knock a bloke on the head an' drop him in the river—amazin' cheap, if you've got the cash."

"The river—that's it! How much?"

"How 'bout a hundred—a bloke can't kick on a hundred fer a good neat job. I'm a poor man."

"A hundred it is. I have the cash—I have also a pistol, so do not try to double-cross me."

The beard parted to show an uneven row of yellow fangs. "No fear, pal. Lead me to 'im."

Sighting the blob of light that was the window of the office, Andre nudged the man. That's the place—in there. He is alone—a tall man rather powerful. What you do, do quickly. He is unarmed, but he will surely show fight if he is not overpowered quickly."

From the pocket of his leather coat the man drew a murderous looking blackjack and slipped its rawhide thong about his wrist.

"W'en I clouts 'em they goes down, an' stays down," he growled.

AS THEY approached the building the door suddenly opened and a man stepped out, closing the door behind him. For one brief instant he had stood limned against the light, then stepping to the sidewalk, came directly toward them. "That is he," whispered Andre hoarsely, as he drew back into a narrow slot between two warehouses. "I'd know that gray ulster anywhere."

The leather-coated giant also drew back, blocking the mouth of the slot. Behind him Andre could hear his heavy breathing. He saw the long arm rise high and descend. There was a dull thud and the sound of a body falling to the sidewalk. Andre felt suddenly sick and weak. His knees seemed like water beneath him, and he leaned against a wall for support. The man turned upon him, blocking the narrow entrance.

"Gi' me the hundred. It's fair earned. An' then git on your way. I'll drag 'im through here to the river—an' no corpse left in the street."

With trembling fingers and eyes wide

with horror, Andre drew some bank notes from his wallet, pressed them into the man's outstretched palm and endeavored to push past him. But the huge form continued to block the passage.

"Not so fast, cully. I'll count this, jist in case you'd try to do me in. The job's done. Quit shakin' an' light this match." He thrust a match into Andre's trembling fingers. " 'Old it close, so I kin see. Lor' you gi' me twenty too much—fancy! 'Ere—two tens."

"Keep it!" cried Andre, ignoring the outthrust hand. "Only for God's sake, let me out of here."

The man stood aside. "Gor bless ye—ye're a good man; You can trust me, sir. I'll have him in the river in jig time."

At the club bar Andre swallowed several stiff drinks in rapid succession. Gradually a feeling of vast satisfaction took possession of him. Now he could draw an easy breath. From now on he need fear

no man. For a paltry two hundred and twenty dollars he had insured his future. He wondered how much money M. Conde would advance upon Jacques' securities.

At midnight he called a cab, directing the man to drive him home. Three minutes later, he cancelled the order, giving the address of a well known hotel. He would not go home tonight. Two many things there to remind him of—Jacques. The sickening sound of that thud as the blackjack descended was still too fresh in his memory. Later he would be able to forget—but not tonight. Jacques had brought this upon himself. Had he listened to reason and lent him the money to cover the shortage, this would never have been necessary. After all, a man must look to his own self preservation. Jacques would have allowed him to rot in prison—so now, Jacques was dead.

THE following morning he presented himself at the bank and was admitted to the private office of M. Conde without question. The old banker read Jacques' note, and it was nearly noon before the two finished going through the various documents, which M. Conde placed in two piles upon his desk. When the appraisal was concluded he turned to Andre.

"These securities," he said, indicating one of the piles, "are all of the best. Retaining them as collateral we can safely advance one hundred and fifty thousand dollars upon them. Those mining investments," pointing to the other pile, "are, of course, worthless as collateral. This does not mean that they are necessarily worthless. Some of them may prove very valuable. But for us to advance any money upon them would be a rank gamble. My attention had been called to heavy withdrawals of the funds of Rancour & Flandreau. And rumor reached my ears that Jacques was investing heavily in undeveloped mining ventures. I had intended to speak to the boy upon his return from the North in the spring. I am glad to see that he has retained more than enough in good property to cover."

"Ah yes, M. Conde, you may rest assured that Jacques would do nothing dishonorable."

"Certainly not—intentionally. But long experience in matters financial has taught me that at times even the most honorable of men have allowed their enthusiasm for certain risky investments that promised huge returns, to outweigh their better judgment."

"Yes, I suppose that that is true. However, this year the house of Rancour & Flandreau should make a great deal of money. It should, in fact, be the banner year of its existence. For Jacques has succeeded in securing the fur of a large band of the Montagnais, who made a record catch this winter—and whose trade has previously always gone to the Hudson's Bay Company. It is to pay for this fur that we require, at this time, this large amount of cash."

With the congratulations of the old banker in his ears, Andre proceeded to the club, and after luncheon returned to the bank and drew the hundred and fifty thousand dollars in cash.

Proceeding to his office, he seated himself at his desk and eyed the old bookkeeper who was busy with some invoices.

"Leduc," he said abruptly, "you are alone here in Montreal, I believe—since the death of your wife? No ties to hold you here?"

The man faced about on his high stool and blinked myopically behind his thick lenses. Yes, sir, I am all alone. I have nothing to hold me here — except my work."

"Jacques and I were talking about you last evening. It seemed to both of us that you have several times expressed a desire to return to France—to the home of your boyhood."

The old man sighed. "Ah, yes—to Carcassonne. My wife and I—she, too, was from Carcassonne—we always planned to

return—some day—that our days might end where they began. But it was not to be. From year to year we put it off, that we might have more money for our old age. Then she became sick. She was sick for a long time. There was the operation which did not save her life. And there was the funeral. And after that, I have not had enough money to more than pay my passage—so I have stayed on."

"Yes. You have been with the house of Rancour & Flandreau for many years, Leduc."

"Ah, yes—for forty-two years, come Ste. Anne's day."

"Forty-two years, is it? That is a long time, Leduc, to remain in the employ of one house. You are no longer young. You have served this house long and faithfully and very capably. You have earned a rest—a long rest. Therefore, Jacques and I have decided to allow you to return to France."

"But—Monsieur," cried the old man, his tongue trembling visably between his lips, "I—I have not enough money saved."

Andre interrupted him with a smile. "We will gladly furnish the money—in appreciation of your long and faithful service. Jacques has authorized me to hand you five thousand dollars in cash."

"Five — thousand — dollars," faltered the oldster, his voice trembling. "Sir—you are not—not making sport of me?"

"Does this look like it?" retorted Andre, handing the man a packet of bank notes. "Count it. It is yours."

With trembling hands, Leduc counted the money. "It is all here. It is all mine? Ah—Carcassonne! How can I ever thank you—and M'sieu Jacques?"

"Do not try to thank us. Your work has been thanks enough. There is only one condition in connection with your acceptance of this money. You are to leave Montreal at once—today. Go home now, and pack whatever you require. You may leave the rest, and I will buy it at your own figures—"

"I have nothing, sir, that will not go into my small trunk. After my wife died, I sold our small belongings and moved into a rooming house."

"So much the better. Return here, and I shall see you on a train for New York."

"For New York, M'sieu? But surely the ships also sail to France from here?"

"It is our desire that you take passage from New York—and at once."

"Very well. And will M'sieu Jacques be here when I return? I would see him once again, to thank him."

"No, you will not see Jacques. You know how Jacques is—more sentimental than I am. Despite the fact that he is a "North man" he is sentimental as a woman. He knows this, and it embarrasses him. It is because he thinks so much of you that he requested that you depart without seeing him. I know that you will grant him this favor."

"I should like to say good-by to him. But—for Mr. Jacques I would do anything in the world! It shall be as he wishes."

As the train bearing the old bookkeeper pulled out, Andre heaved a sigh of relief. "They will never be able to question him concerning the withdrawal of the funds," he muttered, and calling a cab, was driven to his club.

The day following the departure of Leduc, Andre visited Police Headquarters and was closeted for an hour with the chief. The next morning the newspapers carried the story of the failure of the house of Rancour & Flandreau, due to misappropriation of funds by Jacques Rancour, who had disappeared.

AT THE request of Andre, M. Conde was appointed receiver for the house of Rancour & Flandreau. Upon the morning following this appointment by the court, Andre went to the bank with the packet of mining papers and offered to turn them over to M. Conde as assets.

The old banker smiled. "As liquid assets those papers are worthless. The only

asset I have been able to uncover is the real estate. Unfortunately for you, my boy, this will involve the Rancour mansion, of which Jacques was a joint owner."

"Ah, yes. It must, I suppose, be put up at public sale. I assume, however, that this will take some little time. I shall in the meantime try in some manner to obtain the necessary funds to purchase it. I should hate, for sentimental reasons, to see it pass into the hands of a stranger."

"I can well believe it, my boy. As a matter of fact, these fine old residential properties, situated as that is, far from the heart of the city, realize at a forced sale only a very small portion of their real value. I am sure we can arrange to buy it in for you, and take a mortgage as collateral. What I am most interested in is the whereabouts of the hundred and fifty thousand dollars in cash that you withdrew at Jacques' request."

"Jacques undoubtedly took that with him when he fled. I carried the cash, together with these mining papers, upon which you would make no loan, directly to the office and turned them over to Jacques that very afternoon. I saw him place them in the safe. The next morning when Jacques did not appear, I opened the safe, and found only these papers. The cash was gone."

M. Conde shook his head sadly. "It is hard for me to believe—that a Rancour should turn thief. It is this wild speculation in mining properties that was the cause of it—the blame, of course, lies with the man himself. For more than one hundred years the families of Rancour and Conde have done business together. It is inconceivable to me that a Rancour—and especially Jacques Rancour, whom I have always regarded as a man of the highest honor, could have acted in this manner."

"Ah, yes — it is also inconceivable to me," Andre sighed. "If you are desolated, M. Conde—you who were only his friend—consider my feelings. I am his brother—and it is upon my name that he has brought this dishonor. So great is my shame that, at times, it seems I cannot look men in the eye."

"Do not feel that way, my boy," the older man advised. "Go about as before—and keep your chin up. Remember that the name of Rancour is too old a name to be dishonored by the misdeeds of one black sheep. Men do not blame a man for the misdeeds of his brother. In time the incident will be forgotten."

"I hope that you are right, M. Conde. At least, I thank you from the bottom of my heart for your advice and encouragement. And now—you say these papers are worthless as assets. I have not much money, but I will offer you one thousand dollars for them. I will take a gambler's chance that some one of them—or possibly more than one—may prove of some value."

The banker smiled. "In such case I shall list them as assets, and shall immediately accept your offer. As evidence of investment in unlisted and undeveloped mining properties they are, as I told you, worthless. But as an asset, a thousand dollars—is a thousand dollars. As a friend, I must advise against this transaction. As receiver for the house of Rancour & Flandreau, I must consummate it. I shall have the necessary transfers made immediately."

CHAPTER IX

HELENE

HELENE FLANDREAU opened her eyes. The little night light was burning on the table beside her bed, and beyond the night light she could see, rocking slowly and silently, old Babette. Her brow drew into a puzzled frown, and she passed a hand across it as though to brush away something that seemed pressing in upon her. Why was the night light burning? And why did Babette sit there rocking? She could not remember going to bed.

"Babette!" she called softly. "Why do you sit there? Have I been sick?"

The old woman stepped to the bedside, made some slight adjustment of the cover, and smoothed it with her hand.

"No, Mams'lle, not sick. It is that you fainted and for a long time you have been asleep. The so detestable Andre Rancour was here. And after he left, Hawkins carried you here and I put you to bed."

Andre Rancour! Ah, yes—she remembered. Andre had brought something to her—her ring—the ring that Jacques had given her. She felt for it under the covers. Yes, it was there upon her finger. But why had she fainted. Never could she remember of having fainted. Women who faint she had held in contempt. Jacques—what was it about Jacques? Oh, yes—he was to return from the North.

Suddenly, almost with the force of a blow, recollection surged upon her brain. Her fists clenched beneath the covers, and she bit her lips to keep from crying out before Babette, who stood by the bedside, an indistinct shape in the glow of the tiny night light.

"You may go to bed now, Babette," she managed to say. "It was silly of me to faint. See—I am quite all right."

"But—since you were a wee babe I have taken care of you always."

"Yes, Babette. You're a dear. But it is foolish to stay here when I do not need you. I am all right, now. It does not make one ill to faint. You may put the light out, too."

Muttering a protest, the old woman obeyed. At the door she turned. "I shall leave my door open, and if you call out ever so slightly, I shall hear you."

Alone, Helene lay staring wide-eyed into the velvet blackness of her room. It all came to her now—all that Andre had told her. Jacques had returned to Montreal. Had admitted that he had stolen the funds of the house. That could not be! Surely there was some mistake—some explanation. But—there was the letter! She knew that handwriting—would know it among the handwriting of ten thousand men. To her he had admitted the theft. He had admitted that he already had a wife—somewhere in the North—a wife who was half Indian. Dear God—this could not be so! Not that. Not Jacques. Jacques was hers! Always—ever since they had been children, she had known that he was hers, that some day they would marry. Jacques was crazy—else he would not have written a thing like that. Ah, that was it—he was crazy. Once too often he had gone into the North—into that terrible North! He was mad—mad with the madness of the awful silence of the snow barrens. From her father she had heard it—and from Jacques—the snow madness—the terrible *mal du nord*—that saps men's brains. But wait—could this thing be? He must have been sane when he wrote concerning the purchase of fur. He even had requested that Leduc notify her of his early return. Surely those were not the words of a mad man—not a man mad with the terrible madness of the North. What was it Jacques had told her of this madness? Of how men glared like wild beasts—of how the snow turned blood-red before their eyes. Of how they rushed screaming and cursing their God—away, screaming and cursing against the awful silence. Of how in their ears the blazing aurora hissed and crackled, and the

little stars made snapping sounds as they winked down coldly from the night sky. Of how the very silence roared in their ears with the crashing of a thousand cannons. And of how at the last they sprawled on the snow at the crack of their own guns, or staggered blind and starved into the

shelter of a rock—bushed. No—Jacques was not mad, for in such madness is neither craft, nor the cunning to plot a crime. Nor the ability to write that one has a wife in the North who is beautiful, and who is half Indian.

Over and over in her mind she revolved the words of Andre, and the words of Jacques' letter, considering the details from every slant and angle—hoping against hope to find some false note, something upon which to pin her faith in Jacques. But there was no single ray of hope, either in what Andre had told her—or in the words of Jacques' letter. She must face the facts.

"Oh, Jacques! Jacques!" she cried aloud.

Soft, heavy footsteps sounded in the darkness, and close beside her ear she heard a voice. "There, there, M. Jacques is not here. He is in the North. He will not return until spring."

"He will never return, Babette," Helene said bitterly. "Go back to your room now, Babette."

After the padding footsteps had faded into silence, Helene tossed and moaned. "I will forget," she murmured in a hard, dry voice. "I will forever blot you from my memory. Oh—I hate you! *I hate you!*"

Tearing the ring from her finger she hurled it into the darkness. There was a sharp click as it struck the wall—then silence as it rolled to rest upon the thick carpet.

ONE morning a week later Helene Flandreau stepped into the bank and was shown at once into the private office of

In the next issue of **SHORT STORIES**

Creeping mystery and terror casts a shadow over Chinatown, its symbol is . . .

KING LEE'S DEATH DRUM

A novelette in our next number

by

Walter C. Brown

M. Conde, who welcomed her with a fatherly smile.

"Ah, my dear Helene! It is indeed good to see you. I am honored. It is not often that we old ones are delighted by a visit from one so young and so beautiful. Be seated, child. How, I pray, may I be permitted to serve you?"

"I came to arrange for letters of credit, M. Conde," the girl replied. "I am sailing for France within a few hours."

"Ah, you are going to France—to the land of your father and your mother? And how long are we, here, to be deprived of the sunshine of your presence?"

"I do not know," the girl answered, in a dull listless voice. "A year—two years—ten. It does not matter. I wish to hand you this." Opening her purse, she produced a location paper, with an appended report. "Andre Rancour handed me this several days ago. It was the—the night that—that—"

"Yes, yes, my dear—pray proceed."

"He had with him a packet of such papers. He said they were probably worthless, but that they must be turned over to the receiver of the house of Rancour & Flandreau. It was stated in the papers that you have been appointed receiver. Therefore, I am turning this over to you."

The old banker scanned the location paper, glanced at the report and, cackling dryly, handed it back. "Aye—it is indeed worthless. It has no value as an asset. Andre turned over to me the packet of which you spoke. There was not the value of a dollar in the lot. I told the boy as much, but despite that he offered to buy them for one thousand dollars—which amount I fear the poor lad can ill afford to spare—saying that he would take a gambler's chance that one or more of them might, in time, prove of some value. A gambler's chance is a poor asset to hold for the benefit of creditors, so I sold him the lot."

"What is a gambler's chance?"

"Taking a gambler's chance, my dear, is betting upon a remote possibility. In the parlance of the gaming fraternity, it is also known as taking a long shot. To illustrate—if I have here a bottle into which I drop nine hundred and ninety-nine white beans and one black bean, and then offer a purse of, say five hundred dollars, to the one who blindfolded, should draw the black bean from the bottle—there are many people who would gladly pay one dollar for each bean they were allowed to draw, upon the remote chance that the bean they selected would be the black bean, and they would receive the five-hundred-dollar prize. Many even look upon such speculation as an investment—whereas it is merely a gamble. They are taking a gambler's chance."

Helene sat for some moments regarding the document, turning it over and over in her hands.

"Will you sell me this one?" she suddenly asked.

M. Conde laughed. "Most certainly not! Keep it, child! I have told you it is worthless."

"But no—I wish to buy it. Here is your dollar. I, too, will take a gambler's chance."

An hour later as Helene, accompanied by Babette and followed by Hawkins laden down with bags, made her way up the gangplank of her liner, a rabble of newsboys burst upon the pier, each trying to outcry the others in the vending of his papers. From the confused babel of sounds, the words of headlines reached her ears:

EXTRA! EXTRA! BODY OF JACQUES RANCOUR FOUND IN RIVER!

EXTRA! SUICIDE OF MISSING HEAD OF BUSINESS HOUSE.

EXTRA! EXTRA! MURDER!

EXTRA! PROMINENT BUSINESS MAN ROBBED AND MURDERED!

(*Part II in the next* SHORT STORIES)

All Life Is a Gamble—A Whirlpool of Chance from Birth to the Grave . . .

LUCK

By THEODORE ROSCOE

Author of "Blackout," "Shanghai Express," etc.

"SARATOGA!" The word, gritted low through the little man's teeth, was uttered like a curse. Slumped tiredly against the flank of the tall old elm, he scowled across the shade-dappled width of Union Avenue at bright cars sliding through stone portals labeled *Automobile Entrance.* Chauffeurs; flashing chromium; sleek enamel in an exciting haze of dust. Just once he'd have liked to glide through that gate in his own car with a chauffeur.

"Saratoga!"

He limped on up the wide avenue under the shade trees, crossed to the Field Gate and lined up with the suckers.

"Move over, bum!"

"Look here!" He cut the jostler with a look that might have emanated from Mr. Henry Wayne Whitney. "Who's a bum?"

Just like all these cheap horse players—crowding and pushing—no manners. At the window a fat, sweaty woman behind him snarled rudely at him to hurry up, and he almost dropped a nickel. He fumbled for the coins in his pocket, bitter-lipped. "Saratoga!"

And it wouldn't hurt the ticket-seller to wait a minute, he thought grimly, as the man eyed him in impatience. Don't worry, they'd get his money soon enough. He counted out the coins with trembly fingers —nickels, dimes, grimy pennies—hunting desperately for a fifth penny in the recesses of a torn pocket—extracting the cent-piece as if it were a recovered diamond. It was a diamond, too, when one cent stood between you and Admission. For a moment the situation was critical—a heart-flutter caused him to breathe heavily—but at last the dollar was counted and he had a field ticket in his hand.

Inside the park he sighed relief. He found a deserted bench screened by shrub, and surreptitiously took off a shoe. He clutched his bare foot, wincing, massaging the cramped instep. He was used to the bunion's throb, but the stone-bruise was wearisomely painful. Oh! It had been a long walk up from the spring meeting at Belmont. Of course he had stopped off at Aqueduct and Narragansett on the way, but he'd missed the ride he'd expected out of Rhode Island and the trudge across New England and the Adirondacks had seemed endless. Especially the delay—thirty days for vagrancy—at Albany. Thirty days! He flushed.

He stuffed his swollen foot back into the cracked shoe, and sat brooding with the grocery-string laces forgotten in his fingers. Jailed. As a common tramp. Not that he hadn't been arrested before. In a horse room at Buffalo; as a crap-game onlooker at Santa Anita; for some forgotten reason at Louisville; and that miserable incident at Miami where he'd borrowed a razor at the Five-andTen with every intention of sneaking a shave in a gas station washroom and putting it back. Lord! he'd only wanted to look decent at Hialeah; one shave wouldn't have hurt the razor.

THOSE charges hadn't stuck, anyway; he wouldn't have cared if they had. It was just another hazard you took as a gambler. But to see yourself booked: *Fortunatus* Smith—White—American—Age 68. *Vagrant*—

"Judge, I follow the horses—"

The magistrate had been kind. Keen blue eyes looking down. Sympathizing with the broken shoes, shapeless clothing, uncut silver-gray hair. "When did you pick your last winner, Mr. Smith?"

"Well, Judge, the fact is—"

He'd have been all right if he hadn't fainted. You couldn't get through an airless court room after three days on two cups of coffee and a nickel hamburg. The thirty days had been intended as generosity. But he hadn't been able to eat in the pen; he didn't want public benefactions, judicial sympathy for his gray hairs. Why, he might've been a judge himself if—

"Saratoga!"

He gritted his teeth, bending to lace his shoe. Grocery string broke, and he fumbled, panting a little, musing over the knot.

"Son," he could hear his father's admonition, "a fool and his money are soon parted."

He had come to Saratoga anyway—that had been 1889—no, '90—dates weren't clear any more—he could remember the horse, though—Abolitionist. Coming from eight lengths behind to walk away with the Consolation, leaving him a thousand dollars in the hole with the favorite, a black failure named Lightning-Legs.

HE HADN'T returned to college that September. It wasn't that his father, who looked a little like that Albany judge, had cut him off. He could have gone on with a scholarship. But, torts and dry writs of replevin after that week of Saratoga? Stale tomes and actions after living the Sport of Kings? What were the laws of Blackstone compared to those of Chance? Oh, it had had him from the first. The thrill of paddock and grandstand, of stable smells and jockey talk, of cheering crowds at the fence, of bunched ponies coming down the home stretch neck and neck.

From Saratoga to Havre de Grace—Hawthorne to Havana—he had followed it as Cortez followed the sun. Winning or losing, it hadn't mattered in those early days. What had mattered was being there—in the thing; with the thing; of the thing. Chatting with the dainty little men in their rainbow-hued silk shirts. Discoursing with the trainers. Idling with the handlers. Coffee in some lunch car at 5 A. M. with the touts. Early morning try-outs. Dust and shouting. Flags. Smell of dew on the Blue Grass. Poring over the racing forms. Touching elbows with the great and near great. Watching a colt develop into a champion. A champion come home—

But it had cost. His inheritance. His career. Laura.

Laura! That had been a heavy price, unsupportably heavy. His shoulders drooped; he sat bowed over his knees with clenched hands, thinking of her. He thought of her as he had seen her last, thirty years ago, in the doorway of that hotel bedroom—New Orleans.

"Charles—" (She always called him by his middle name.) "Charles, this is the last—"

That low, toneless voice of finality. How beautiful she had been. Pale—

"I've paid up the bill for you, Charles. Some money I'd hidden. I'll take care of a lawyer, too. You had your chance—"

His chance! God knew, he'd tried. Desperately, honestly, sincerely. He hadn't been able, that was all. The thing was in his blood. How could you sit in a patent-attorney's office with Dolly Gray running at the Preakness, or Cottonpicker at ten to one on that new track out on the Coast?

"You hate gambling, Laura? But all life is a gamble, a matter of chance from birth to the grave. What's more of a gamble than Business? Or look at those who lost in the San Francisco fire! And I tell you, this streak can't go on much longer. My luck's bound to turn—"

God knew too, about chance. That losing streak hadn't turned. It had gone on and on and on. Against the law of averages. Against percentage. For forty-five years—bad breaks, impossible upsets, always losing. Oh, an accidental winner on occasion to rescue him from bleak starvation; but never once anything big, no real bonanza, no twenty-to-one shot or three-horse parlay to put him in the money.

It hadn't been natural—not even human. But Bright Star on the nose, and Bright Star placed. Bet her to place, and she showed. Bet her to show and she placed or won, and if he played her across the board she came in fourth. All his life it had been like that. For forty-five years. Forty-five endless, luckless years.

"Fortune," he whispered to himself. "Fortune—!"

That was the nickname he'd won at this track so long ago—the only thing he'd ever won. They'd grinned and chuckled as they called him that; crossed the street or their fingers when they saw him coming.

"That's Fortune Smith. Lost his shirt at Haverstraw."

"That's Fortune Smith. Bankrupt when Light Brigade beat Shakamaxon."

Of course nobody looked sidewise at him now; the old boys were gone with the days; no one in these cheap Pari-Mutuel crowds remembered him. Racing today was a racket, a shrewd-eyed chiseling speculation like the stock market. Only a few old-

timers were left. He'd recognized Darkey Joe in the Whitley Stable at Belmont, and he'd seen Luke Thompson sneaking a book at Narragansett. Luke would've forced him into accepting a loan, and he'd slunk out of Luke's way. He didn't want to win with Luke's money; he wanted to win with his own.

"If I could only hit it once! Just once!"

How many times had he sat on some secluded bench and begged that of the sky? He looked up now, hungry throat-muscles cording, fingers clutched together as though in supplication. The sky was the same as when he'd seen it here the first time—mountain air tinctured with azure and summer sunshine. There was a murmur of gathering crowds, the familiar buzz of post time.

Somewhere a bugle's brassy call.

The little man in the shapeless coat stood up like a soldier called to attention. His face muscles were rigid; he stared into the sunlight a little blindly. Only his hands quivered, fumbling into the lining of his coat to unpin two soiled bills secreted there. His fingers shook; one of the bills escaped him, and he caught it wildly against his knee.

Two dollars.

He muttered, "Saratoga!" Then, straightening his shoulders, he turned resolutely; limped toward the path to the Pari-Mutuel windows. This time it *was* his last chance.

ORDINARILY he would have looked for a sign—a four-leaf clover, a license plate that added up to thirteen, a bluebird's brilliant flash. He would have carried a rabbit's foot, or rubbed a pickaninny's head.

And once he would have consulted a system—an elaborate compilation of track records, jockey weights, handicaps and selections—a chart as complicated as the ritual of an almanac or the key to some interlocking code. He would have juggled percentages like a mathematician; prognosticated like an astrologer; pored over pedigrees; analyzed the racing forms.

But long ago he had learned the fallability of the Sure Thing; seen the caprice of Wall Street, of earthquakes, of the brick that falls from the roof to kill the unsuspecting passer-by. He had tried other methods of deduction—three pins spied on the pavement must surely indicate that Tia Juana five-to-one shot, Three Pins. Cloudy moonlight seen over his left shoulder pointed to a Derby entry named Misty Moon.

Where omens, too, had failed, he had turned to an appeasement of the gods, wooing their favor with charms and incantations. Systems, omens, supplications—all had been disregarded. The gods were against him; with irony they had inspired his father to name him Fortunatus, then let him wander adrift in a world of hazards, handicaps and race tracks. They had cost him his life and Laura; reduced him to vagrancy and hobo shoestrings. So at last he could afford to scorn them, ignore them, dare them to their worst. He can laugh at the gods who has nothing to lose.

He pushed the two dollars through the tote-ticket window, husking, "On the nose."

"What horse, mister?"

"Oh?" The seller's voice startled him. "Nuh-number Eight."

Number 8. He stared at the pink ticket dully. He didn't even know the horse's name, the jockey, which race. These Pari-Mutuels confused him. No matter. It was the first window he'd come to, the first number he could think of—

"Move on, will you, Sporting Life? There's a hundred people behind you."

"Oh. Thanks. Certainly."

He wandered out into the crowd, clutching the ticket tightly. Those last two dollars had cost him plenty—cost like two thousand dollars. Harder to earn than that year's salary from that Baltimore patent-attorney. Harder to save than the insurance money he'd once tried to save for Laura. When you were too old for

farm work, too lame for hash-slinging, when you couldn't wash dishes any more—

"Hey, watch where you're going, can't you?"

The collision of shoulders staggered him; he had to catch the big man's arm for support. Checkered suit—polka dot tie—for an instant he thought it was Jim Slawter. But no, old Texas Jim had plunged out of the picture back in '25—last saw him at Arlington—this was somebody else with a blonde on his arm.

He made to raise his hat, then realized he didn't have any.

"Excuse me, sir. I'm very sorry."

He knew they were looking after him, and he tried to button his coat and hide a fragment of sleeve-lining as he walked away. Good old Texas Jim—and what had become of Jim's sidekick, Sailboat Sam Perry? Ready to wager a five-horse parlay any day—they'd been gamblers in those days. Gentlemen. Not like these cheapjacks around him now, shoving, elbowing, greedy. These were the faces of horse players, not gamblers. Scrabbling and chiseling. Cheering at the show of a two-dollar nag, cursing if they lost a fiver. Glutting for money, easy money. They didn't love the horses, the thoroughbreds, the game. They would not have walked five hundred miles to reach the track. Racing? They didn't know its cost. Most of them couldn't afford to play.

Noise flowed around him, some of it familiar, some bewildering. Voices. "Demonstrator in the Sixth!"—"Lissen, Max, this is hot."—"Hurdy Gurdy at ten-to-one!"—"That punk couldn't've held Paul Revere's horse down Main Street!" Women groping in pocketbooks. Men gathered around touts. Wise boys pencilling programmes. Loud-speakers blaring. Electric numerals flashing on boards that looked like the Telephone Exchange.

Fortune Smith stood in uncertainty, confused. He couldn't figure out these Pari-Mutuel odds. He couldn't figure anything any more. Old habit had started him toward the paddock, but when he saw the horses and the groups about them under the trees, he turned back toward the field; he didn't want to watch them saddle up today. He had a horse, that was all. Number 8. The odds didn't matter; he was only vaguely aware that he had picked a long shot—the electric numerals showed thirty-five to one, but then, when he looked again, thirty to one.

His last chance—thirty to one. But if he'd picked the favorite it wouldn't have differed. If his knees were shaky as he pushed out through the passage to the Field, it wasn't the long shot—it was because he'd walked an endless road to get here, his legs were giving out, and there was a sickening, almost overpowering smell from the hotdog counter under the grandstand. After this race was run, he'd have a long walk left. He couldn't let down. It was several miles farther out to Saratoga Lake.

Saratoga Lake. He knew the place. Where the bank was steep and the water deep and clear. Where he'd tipped out of the canoe that day with Laura, and Laura's young arms, strongly swimming, had saved him. She hadn't let him down. The gods must have laughed hard that day—as hard as he was laughing at them now.

HE FOUND himself leaning against the white rail, laughing. Not with his face, not audibly, but somewhere inside with a mirth that cramped his diaphragm,

twisted his empty stomach and made him sick. Sunlight hurt his eyes; noise swelled around him; things blurred. He had to stop this or he wouldn't be able to walk out there. He clutched the warm, white rail for support as elbows jostled him. They were off! He hadn't realized the race had started. Horses in the distance the size of mechanical toys, streaming along the far side of the track.

"At the quarter—Prestige, by a length—Belleraphon—Okey Doke—Wing-Walker in last place—!"

The announcement, electrically magnified, jarred him. He strained to follow the fleeting string of ponies. Dust drifted as brown smoke across the far white rail; a cloud-shadow sailed across the intervening expanse of lawn; afternoon breeze rustled the azaleas that hedged the plume-white fountain. Wing-Walker left at the post! He smiled, dry-lipped. That was his thirty-to-one shot, of course.

"At the half—Prestige and Okey Doke neck and neck—Belleraphon dropped back to fifth—Tom Collins, third—Abelard, fourth—Wing-Walker, last—

Certainly. Walking. Half a furlong in the rear and practically slowed to a canter, for all the elbow-work of the jockey in black and white. Against the rail, the little man in the shapeless coat sighed; crushed the ticket in his pocket. Hardly worth while waiting it out.

"At the three-quarters—Prestige—Tom Collins—Abelard—Okey Doke—Belleraphon—"

They were coming down the home stretch, clustered in the dash. The big roan with the green-red colors atop looked the winner, but a sleek gray, spurting along the inside rail, carrying a glimpse of pink and white-checkered silk, was contending furiously. "Come on, Prestige!" the crowd was bawling. "Stay with it, you fool!"—"Come on, you, Abelard—!" Nobody was calling to the wash-out twenty lengths behind.

At the rail the little man closed his eyes. Hoofs went by as a roll of thunder; noises melted to a meaningless roar; there was a crush around him, a smell of dust, sweat, whiskey, cigarettes, mustard on a hot dog. "Yaaaay—Abelard! Did you see that? *Whoooop-eeeee!"*

At his side a jubilant girl was jumping up and down. A sharp heel came down on his bunion, and he gasped, opening his eyes at the pain. Well beyond the clubhouse terrace the winning horses had slowed down to disperse. Wing-Walker, at a discouraged gallop, was drifting past the judge's stand.

It was over; he was through. Now that it was done, he was swept by a sense of relief—that feeling he'd had in Cuba after the trip up San Juan Hill, and again coming out of the Argonne with the Twenty-Second Field Artillery. He drew the tote-ticket from his pocket and folded it slowly, smiling down, his fingers tensed to tear. Then thunderous applause from the grandstand caused him to lift his head; he glanced toward the judge's platform, pulled a breath in astoundment.

Electric numerals flashing across the tabulator announced WIN, PLACE and SHOW. The numbers read: 8—3—5.

Abelard was Number 8. His horse had come in at thirty to one!

HIS hands, tremulous at the cashier's window, fumbled the crisp bills so that they crackled like dry leaves. Fifty-eight dollars and forty-two cents! No, sixty dollars and some nickels and dimes! He couldn't count it. How could you count a treasure, a bonanza, a million?

He couldn't believe it. Backing from the window, he stood staring down at the money in his clutch, stunned. It wasn't true. This was dreaming. A delusion like the hallucinations that had troubled his mind lately—visionary banquet tables, mirages of cool lawns and restful woods that sometimes teased him when tramping up some hot, hungry, friendless road.

But the money was there, undeniably in

his grasp; someone brushed against him in the crowd, and a voice said genially, "Hang on to those skins, mister; you'll lose 'em before you can spend 'em." Someone else saw it, too!

He steadied himself and walked out into dusty sunlight, still staring at the handful of bills. People and voices eddied around him, and he found the privacy of an elms' shade and sat down on the grass, clutching the crisp bills in his lap. Sixty and some dollars! A long time since he'd had sixty dollars in his grasp. His eyes were wet. It wasn't the money. What did he care for money? At last he'd picked a winner —a long shot—a horse that came in at thirty-to-one—and on the last two dollars he'd had, or ever expected to have, in the world.

IT WAS luck. Sheer, hair-brained, unadulterated, incredible luck! A windfall that had come without rhyme, reason or invocation—a caprice of Fate as whimsical as the whisk of a breeze or the chance of birth or death in life itself. But what an impossible break for a man at the very frayed-out end of his rope! Thirty-to-one odds! The money verifiably in hand, the shock of it diminishing, Fortune Smith found himself uneasy, confused, almost frightened.

He hadn't come here for this; he had come prepared for something else. For weeks he had steeled himself in preparation. Now this windfall was too sudden, too unforeseen, like an abrupt switch in plans or the sudden endowment of a legacy for which one must be responsible. This money opened a door he didn't want to look through; lengthened a road he didn't want to travel.

"It's not right," he whispered aloud. "Not right."

He knew it wasn't. This hadn't been meant for him. Somehow the wheel had slipped; the ball had bounced wrong. The gods had made an error? He mustn't depend on this; it would lead him into hopefulness, that old feeling about Tomorrow; that foolish optimism it had taken him so long to revise.

There was irony in this—savage irony. Staring down at the money now, he felt as if he had found something that hadn't been intended for him, somebody's pocketbook. Worse, it was like a silly straw—a ridiculous straw that had drifted into his grasp to keep him afloat and kicking a little longer in an inevitable sea. Well, the hell with straws—when you've made up your mind to jump in—

Moved by something beyond his own volition, hardly realizing his direction, he was shuffling up the path to the Pari-Mutuel windows. When he saw his destination, he nodded to himself. His feet had apprehended the slower process of his thinking.

Quite deliberately he walked to the seller's window under $5.00—WIN—shoved the bills and coins, all of them, across the counter.

"What number, mister?"

Fortune Smith muttered, "Any number —Number One."

A string of pasteboard tickets clicked from a brass slot. Echoes of a bugle. Betters surging toward the field. Fortune Smith caught up the totes; wadded them carelessly into a shapeless pocket.

"Hey, mister, you're forgetting your change."

He fumbled up the coins. His fingers had forgotten how to pick up silver. Fifty-five cents. Well, that was all right—a little bonus for self-honesty. Enough to let him sit down in the grandstand near the finish line, a small luxury he hadn't expected to enjoy. Smiling dryly, he made his way to the grandstand wicket, paid the extra admission, slipped into a handy seat. Thanks for all small favors. At least he could see the finish from the grandstand—

"They're off—!"

He couldn't see them. A man's red neck and tweed back barred the view, and

then the horses were lost behind a girl's picture hat.

"At the quarter—Runorbust—Bright Boy—Sun Pacer—King Kong passing Intolerant—"

Eleven miniature horses streamed from behind the girl's picture hat. They looked like three-year-olds going seven furlongs. Impossible to make out their numbers. The tabulator opposite the grandstand announced the odds on Number 1 at eight-to-three.

"At the half—Bright Boy—Sun Pacer—Runorbust—King Kong—"

The roan carrying red was competing fiercely with a black horse under gold and purple. Runorbust was evidently busting. A new contender, gray under blue, was coming up through the melee.

"At the three-quarters—Bright Boy—Sun Pacer—Goliath—"

Coming home, three horses held a long lead—the roan, the black and the gray. Cries and appeals stormed under the grandstand roof. It was going to be close. In spite of himself, the little man in the shapeless coat stood up, craning. At least his last race at the Spa was a grandstand thriller. He heard himself shouting, not for his horse but for the winning horse, any winning horse. They were nose to nose, striving valiantly, jockies riding their necks, hoofs pounding in triple unison, trailing a haze of dust. The grandstand roared.

Then the picture hat cut out his view; he sank back dumbly. It was over. People were leaning from their seats and an overhush indicated the decision was up to photographs. Then a spatter of applause. The girl in the picture hat wailed disappointment. "Oh, Ben, our horse lost!" The man in tweeds growled, "Come on home, Alice. We're cleaned."

Fortune Smith shook his head in sympathy. They weren't the only ones cleaned. But they were young and would learn. He was standing up to go himself—for good, after forty-five years. But he'd known it wasn't his money.

His frayed cuff snagged on the seat-arm, and he stalled. Floral tributes were going to the roan carrying red. Sun Pacer. Across the tabulator flashed three electric numbers.

1—9—7.

TEN-DOLLAR bills! A stack of them that broke apart in his agitated fingers. One hundred dollars—hundred and twenty—hundred and thirty. At a hundred and forty his mind stopped counting. His vision swam the way it always did when his heart was pounding; the number was beyond numerology, like the numbers in astronomy, beyond comprehension.

On the secluded bench behind the boxwood shrub, he sat dazed, weak. He clasped the money under his coat at the approach of a passer-by. He could hear himself panting. Perspiration stickied his forehead and there was a sharp jab under the ribs where his hand was pressing.

Then, regaining his breath, he withdrew his hand, expecting, of course, to find it empty. The money was there. A slab of ten-dollar bills.

He counted them again, slowly, painstakingly, wetting his thumb. Twenty. Thirty. Forty. Fifty. He couldn't cope with it. When the sum totaled over one hundred he would pause and stare, fuddled as he'd been when, a schoolboy, he was baffled by long columns of addition.

"But it's close to two hundred dollars! Great Lord!"

Then suddenly, convinced of the reality of this, he was angry. That Number 1, plucked from the ether—a horse named Sun Pacer—had come in at eight-to-three. He'd never heard of the roan; didn't know its record, owner, handicap or red-shirted jockey.

Blood heated his cheekbones with a warmth that invaded the scalp under his silver-gray thatch. He regarded the money, gripping back an oath. The gods must be kidding him, laughing in his face. This was a come-on, that's what it was. Poor old Fortune Smith, they were saying, what a duffer! Now that he's lost everything, ready to go to the cleaners with his very life, we'll give one more merry yank on his puppet-strings. We'll play the poor fool with a come-on—let him win a little. Maybe we've scared him into quitting—let's deal him one from the bottom, suck him into one more hand at the game.

A bright lure to feed him on! A come-on from the gods! Sucker!

He pulled himself to his feet, swearing. They couldn't do this to him just when he was ready to deal out. He'd been a sucker, all right—no question about that—but forty-five years had been long enough. Well, he'd show them he could walk out of Saratoga with his boots on. Yes, and he'd show them what he thought of them. Let them have their laugh. He'd fling this come-on in their teeth, by heaven!

Doggedly he limped around the boxwood, elbowed into the crowd and located the Pari-Mutuel windows marked $10.—WIN. An exodus in the direction of the field warned him the horses were at the post; he hurried forward.

"You're just under the wire, sir. What horse?"

He jerked his head up at the "sir." Smiled caustically. Naturally at the $10 window you were a gentleman.

"Number Seven," he said hoarsely. "All of it on Seven. That's my lucky number. It hasn't come in for forty-five years."

Plucking up Number 7 tickets which clicked across the counter, he turned grimly toward the thronged passage to the grandstand. He didn't hear the seller's comment to a companion in a neighboring cage.

"Can you beat that?" the seller demanded with uplifted hands. "Lays a hatful of tens on Seven to win, and goes off mumbling about the gods. But goofy. Like a fox. One of these misers that looks like a scarecrow on the clubhouse terrace, but studies every horse under a microscope and always bets the last minute on a sure thing. But that's the way to clean up, ain't it? I wish I had that guy's dough."

Out in the Press Box the radio announcer was bored.

"Third race at Saratoga—but you listening-in racing fans won't be surprised at this one. No one here expected a contest. . . . Going away from the post, Shadow Maker out in front. . . . No Dice and Clover Lad aren't in it, like I forecast yesterday. . . . Shadow Maker at the quarter by a length. . . . Two lengths at the half. . . . Way out at the three-quarters, and that jockey'll have to pull him or he'll make a track record. . . . It's in the bag, folks, and looks like everybody's going to the cashier's window. Anybody's a fool who didn't buy a ticket on Number Seven!"

IT WAS Shadow Maker in the third at three-to-two, and Star Dial, a five-to-one shot in the fourth. Fortune Smith didn't know why he picked Star Dial, but when that fourth horse came in, too, a sense of mystery whispered to the gray-haired little man.

As he cashed the winning tickets at the pay-off window, he was aware of something in the atmosphere—a violet-amber half light like a queerish gloaming in the afternoon. The air was still and the foliage of the park trees was motionless. A white cloud obscured the sun, and perhaps the mood was a trick of weather, but to Fortune Smith the dropping of wind and the

queerly-tinted daylight were phenomena attendant to a miracle.

Four straight wins! Walking blindly to a window, daring the gods openly, he could back his unluckiest number, and that faithless Seven could turn out to be Shadow Maker, the favorite at three-to-two! After which, Star Dial—chosen by the name glimpsed on a program—a sorrel from the Henry Stables—should come from behind in a hot contest to romp in at five-to-one!

Had the gods at long last relented? Had Fate chosen him for her child? He had tested their caprice, and checked the test. And the answer had come like a rainbow, beyond all hoping or prediction—four straight wins!

Retired to his secluded park bench, the little man in frayed cast-offs and broken shoes found his pockets stuffed with twenty-dollar bills, his heart expanded to the spell of the miraculous. He had been reprieved. Miraculously reprieved! Starting with a thirty-to-one shot from scratch —running two threadbare dollars into this crisp, new, unaccountable mother-lode.

"A stake! I've got a real stake!"

Kimberly, stumbling unexpectedly on a diamond mine, must have experienced the same awe. Or Columbus blindly discovering America. Horse racing or life—it was all in the lap of the gods—destiny unpredictable. He saw now that he had been a real fool; he had tried to call the turn on himself, on life, and as always, the matter was out of his hands.

He lifted his glance to the sky and sat quiet, in gratitude. This, after all those losing years. A chance to clean up, win back, break even on all his losses, or maybe —it was almost too much to dream—end up in the money.

"Thanks," he whispered. "Thanks for the chance."

Then, hearing the bugle's summons, a cold fear invaded his heart. Should he risk it, this race? Wasn't it rushing his luck? He looked around, by old habit hunting a sign, some reassuring omen. Tree-shadowed grass provided nothing. The light was changing and a breeze rustled the lawn.

He thought, "I ought to quit now and come back tomorrow." But mightn't that break his winning streak? He thought,

"I'll play half, and save the rest." But why half—if the gods were with him? He rubbed his forehead nervously. This was money, big money he was betting now. He ought to consult a racing form; at least visit the paddock, study the mounts.

But Columbus had sailed without a chart. The touts hadn't predicted America, any more than they'd picked these four wins this afternoon. Fortune Smith stood in nervous uncertainty. Did he dare it again —blind—? Well, for forty-five years the sure-things and favorites had failed him, same as the percentages and smart tips and rabbits'-feet. Only he ought to have a hunch—before risking this stake, he ought to have something—!

All right. The hunch was to play this fifth race—Number Five—Horse Number Five, sight unseen—that was as good a hunch as any.

Under the grandstand, through a mist of cigar smoke, women's perfumes, smell of popcorn and perspiration, he walked in a thrall of confidence and alternate anxiety. An aroma from the restaurant bar assailed him, tantalizing. When had he eaten last? He ought to buy himself a meal—well afford it with all this cash—no, after this fifth race he'd take time out for a ban-

quet—a dollar now might win ten more, if his horse came in.

If his horse came in! He stood at the seller's window in a nausea of suspense.

"Hurry it up, sir. They're going to the post."

Then Fortunatus Smith squared his shoulders. What manner of gambler was he, folding up like this at the show-down? Automatically his eyes steadied, his lips stiffened, expression washed from his face. He shaped up the stack of bills casually, shoved them over the sill. No split-up on this bet. You couldn't win with frightened money.

"All of that on Number Five," he said steadily. "On the nose."

HE COULDN'T lose. He knew that after that fifth race. Four-year-olds and up, going six furlongs. The experts were having trouble choosing among the entries—there was a lot of whispering and touting. Last minute the favorite and a possible winner had been scratched. At the paddock a jockey had sprained an ankle. The mounts lined up before the clubhouse where Number Five proved to be a trim, white-stockinged bay named Tinder carrying the peppermint-striped colors of the E. G. Bush Stables. The odds on Tinder flashed up as fifteen to one.

Fortune Smith's pulse ticked wildly. That bay was good-looking. Beautiful. He couldn't have hoped to see faster horseflesh. He recalled Bush as an owner from Detroit; he'd seen Bush's entries at Hawthorne. The horses under that peppermint-striped flag were champions, trained by the best. If fifteen-to-one odds seemed long, it was obviously due to a bad season; Tinder had suffered a number of defeats—every good horse had off moments—or perhaps the jockey was a newcomer. But today Tinder would make a comeback. Anyone with half an eye could see that.

A murmur of disappointment traveled across the grandstand as the horses were jockeyed into position. Flickering numerals on the electric tabulator showed the final odds on Tinder as ten to one. Fortune Smith didn't understand the Pari-Mutuels, but he realized his large bet must've lowered the odds on the bay—in reality the risk was the same, but the pay-off would be less; the gamble, in effect, was therefore greater. A checker-suited man in front of him swore, "Damn!" and, throwing down his program, left his seat, glowering in disgust. Fortune Smith leaned forward to retrieve the crumpled program. He could identify the contestants this time.

Bobbing like hobby-horses, the four-year-olds streamed around the curve and strung themselves out along the far, white rail. Charon Rose—Victorian—Mexicana—My Bill—Ringleader—Tinder—Over the Top—Zouave—

Fortune Smith stared in alarm. Number Five—his Tinder!—was running sixth.

"At the quarter—Charon Rose—Victorian—Mexicana—My Bill—"

He listened, unbelieving, dread stealing into his heart.

"The half—Charon Rose—Victorian—Mexicana—My Bill—"

They were fixed in position, strung in sequence along the rail like waxworks traveling along a moving belt. Tinder in sixth place!

"The three quarters—Charon Rose—Victorian—Mexicana—My Bill—" The voice through the loudspeaker was baleful, relentless, somber as the intonation of a judge reading sentence, inexorable as the position of those horses coming fatally into the home stretch.

Then it happened! A thunderclap bang! An electrical sword that stabbed down from the queer-lit sky, made a freakish dazzle in the gloaming and vanished earthward in the turf beyond the mid-track fountain. The sun went out; there was a magnetic smell as though daylight had blown a fuse. Rain gushed down, storming. And in that cloudburst nine race horses mixed in wild melee, for, dazzled

by the lightning bolt, Charon Rose had swerved against the rail; Victorian reared in the path of Mexicana; My Bill skidded, barely avoiding collision with Ringleader; Over the Top went over the fence in perfect steeplechase style. And Tinder, fired by that heavenly spark, was coming around the outside of the mixup like a fire horse clearing a traffic jam—coming through the downpour like an unleashed streak—white stockings mud-spattered, flanks streaming, a bay streak through a storm of water—coming home!

The rain shut off and sunshine sprinkled down just as the tabulator recorded WIN, PLACE and SHOW. 5—9—4.

On his way to the pay-off window, Fortunatus Smith walked in a golden haze. And there was a horse in the sixth race, coming up, named Gibson Girl.

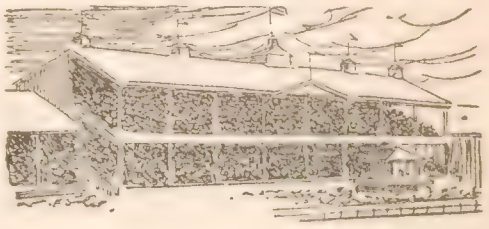
SHE couldn't let him down. Not with that name. It made him think of Laura—Laura at seventeen with a pompadour, puffed sleeves and slender waist—on her shoulder a ribboned straw hat—gray eyes that danced. Laura in a hammock against a background of honeysuckle. Oh, Tell Me Pretty Maiden—! Gibson Girl! Well, the field ought to have a handicap. No doubt about a horse so beautifully christened.

"All of it on Number Eleven—Gibson Girl. To win."

The seller coughed, had to rearrange his necktie and squint down at the bills as if he thought they must be counterfeit. He looked at Fortunatus Smith. "Gee!" he said.

Leaving the window, Fortunatus Smith was pleasantly aware of awed glances at the wad of tickets in his hand. He looked around, smiling indifferently in the way of any seasoned gambler who bets big money. Bagatelle! He tucked the tickets into his pocket; arranged his cuffs. Again he caught a pungence from the restaurant bar, but now he had no appetite for racetrack fare. His stomach pained, but not for just food. The occasion called for dining, a banquet to honor the gods, a celebration such as no quick-lunch bar could satisfy. Piping Spring, or the Great Union Hotel.

Pocket weighted with change, he might have bought a cigar, but he had long since abandoned smoking, and tobacco had become repellent. So he located the washroom, combed his hair, and enjoyed the indulgence of tipping the attendant fifty cents. Then he strolled out toward the paddock, jingling a pocketful of silver. How long it had been since he hadn't worried about economy. To think that yesterday—but that was ancient history now.



He hummed, "While strolling through the park one day—"

At a path-side stand he halted to buy a glass of Spa water. The stuff puckered his mouth; he set the glass down after a sip. But it was good to taste Saratoga after all these years, and it gave him a chance to toss the surprised boy a cartwheel.

"Say! Thanks, mister!"

"It's nothing, lad. Here's another for your mother."

Gibson Girl! He knew he'd picked a winner when he saw her at the saddle-up. A curveting, shining chestnut; spirit in her every line. Ah, she was a beauty. The other horses alongside were mere nags. Such as Gold Digger, Belinda, Subadar, Me Too, Happy Guess and Charlie's Aunt. Sauntering among the mounts, he scanned their names on the program contemptuously. What chance would a Gold Digger have against a Gibson Girl? Or Charlie's Aunt, out of Mr. Jay Anderlip's Estrella and Charlie's Uncle. Sounded inbred.

Fortunatus Smith knew Gibson Girl would have won if only by her lovely name; and she did win, two lengths ahead of the field, at two-to-one. Six straight wins! Music melodied in his ears as his heart sang. He was rich! So rich that the Pari-Mutuel cashier had to pay him off with a certified check. What a fantastic world! This morning his fate had hinged on a copper penny; now he was Croesus, his name on a check emblazoned with six fixures. Down today and up tomorrow. Life was fanciful, zestful, poetic, whimsical and delicious. Overnight it turned a barnstorming stunt flyer into one of the world's most famous men. Lucky Lindy! Or it endowed a music hall clown with Hollywood's greatest genius. It was wonderful. It made motor magnates out of mechanics and monkeys of millionaires. It was full of surprises.

YOU had your dark days—years of them, sometimes—but if you took them standing up, just hung on long enough, it was bound to turn. Percentage. Law of averages. Whether it was business, war or Saratoga. The artist in the garret knew it. Lincoln, waiting for a general knew it. The sailors knew it on the *Santa Maria* when at last they saw land. All you needed was faith and the knowledge that there were no certainties, save the certainty that everything would change. Then, riding the crest of a wave, you must know where to get off. Greed, too much confidence could lead to disaster. Men didn't appreciate fortune; wanted too much. Columbus stayed on too long. Wall Street went too high. Successful in 1914, Germany forgot humility.

Fortunatus Smith, considering his luck, was humble. This check was not his doing. The gods had been with him, and, somehow, Laura.

His ship had come in; he must know, now, when to quit.

Looking up, he noticed a rainbow; heard the brassy notes of a bugle.

"Just this seventh and last race," he promised himself. "Then I'm through."

"Haven't you got the wrong window?"

Fortunatus Smith said quietly, "No, young man, I haven't got the wrong window."

"Only fifty-dollar bets accepted here."

"Very well. May I buy nine thousand dollars worth of fifty-dollar tickets?"

"Nine thou—!" the voice behind the window broke into an up-keyed squeak. "Holy cockeyed Moses! It's Fortune Smith!"

"Luke Thompson!" Fortunatus exclaimed as the seller's face came into focus behind the cage-wire—not the face of a youth, but the severish features of a minister; scholarly nose, glasses, austere forehead, crest of white hair. Fortunatus Smith thrust out a hand. "It's good to see you, Luke. How are you?"

"Wait." The veteran bookie turned to a companion with, "Take over, will you, Joe? Old friend of mine, here!" disappearing through a back door to reappear at the outside corner of the building. "Fortune, by crimminy!" he pumped the smaller hand. "Where you been all these years? And a check for nine G's! Is it real?"

"Real as reality," Fortunatus Smith chuckled at the tall man's awed whisper. "And I want to bet it on this race. My last dollar."

THE veteran bookie stared. "Now has this been a screwy day! Upsets and thunderstorms—thirty-to-one shot in the first and ten-to-one in the fifth, and now you turn up with nine grand. Am I going nuts?"

"It's like the old days, Luke. Nine grand certified. There's a gelding in this race—Number Four—El Dorado—I'm laying this on his nose because I like his name."

"Jumping Judas!" Sincere worry furrowed the ministerial brow. "Why, Fortune, have you gone crazy? Listen," he bent his head in confidence, "I'd get jugged in a minute for touting out here, but I

can't see a pal get souped. You ain't going to plunge all this."

"On Number Four—El Dorado. He can't lose, Luke. He's in."

"But great Godfrey!" the gaunt features strained down to whisper, "even the experts can't forecast this one. It's anybody's, see? Anybody's! And that goat you're playing ain't won a dime in his last twelve starts. Don't do it, man! or if you got to, play two bucks on him across the board. Put that dough away."

"I'm putting it away," Fortunatus Smith smiled, "after doubling it on El Dorado. Meet me afterwards for dinner, will you, Luke? I'll be staying at the Great Union; phone me there. I'll take you out to Piping Spring or Newbold's Lake Inn, or we might drop in at Mother Nelly's. Nice to see Red Myer again, and we might look up Gain-Boy Stevens, too. It'll be just like the old days."

Just like the old days with Luke and the boys around, and orchestra music and suave people in dinner dress drinking champagne and turning their heads to see celebrities. Winners would be setting them up for the house, and Red Myer would come around, crabbing about the evening's take, and talk would be of wine and women and horses—"Remember Epinard? Recall that Derby and Twenty Grand?" Mrs. So and So would be giving a dinner for somebody at the next table—a big publisher, maybe. There'd be a fabulous industrialist, an ambassador, Hollywood stars, a divorced opera singer. Rubbing elbows with smart little jockies, newspaper men, racketeers, horse players and hangers-on. Saratoga was as democratic as Times Square.

They'd have plank steak and a bottle of Chateau and out-of-season strawberries. Fortunatus Smith could see it in his mind's eye. Drive out to dinner in an old-fashioned carriage, that would be the way to go.

Poor Luke. His jaw was gaped down, and his features were blank in astonishment. He was thinner these days and his hair was whiter; his diamond stickpin was conspicuously absent and he looked kind of seedy. Obviously down in his luck, or he wouldn't be selling at a Pari-Mutuel window. And wasn't it like Luke to try to tip off a friend? There'd never been a squarer man at the track.

Something warmed in Fortunatus Smith's heart and put a pinch in his throat. He smiled up reassuringly. "Don't worry about this one, Luke, it's in the bag. And if you haven't got a dinner jacket we'll rent one."

He was conscious of Luke's anxiety as he passed the check through the $50 window. But he'd never laid money on a

surer thing, and he waved the stack of tickets at Luke gaily, calling, "See you later, old chap!" and thrusting lightheartedly into the thronged grandstand passage. The jockies were parading their mounts as he moved toward his seat, and the crowd seemed tense. There was a general craning and murmur. "Look at that!" someone exclaimed. Everyone was staring at the electric tabulator which revealed that the odds on Number Four had altered from seven-to-one to three-to-one, then two-to-one.

"That board's gone whacky!" a woman shrilled.

Fortunatus Smith chuckled inwardly. A feeling of power squared his shoulders. They didn't know he'd cornered the market on El Dorado. Now all the odds on the tabulator were shifting. Players rushed to make late bets. Even the horses seemed excited; kicked up turf and milled around.

They were going to the post. Fortunatus Smith watched them. He'd never see this again; he was watching his last race. An impulse carried his hand to his pocket. Why not see this from the clubhouse? He'd never sat there before. All his life he'd wanted to sit there just once. He had enough change, more than enough. Three pennies left over.

He picked his way to the clubhouse terrace; paid the extra fee; found a seat high up at the back. It would have been amusing to sit below with the Whitleys, Anderlips and those women who looked like actresses, but his tailoring (he grinned to himself) might offend propriety. Anyway, he could see better from here.

ARRIVING at his seat a little breathless, he folded his hands across his breast and leaned back in a luxury of enjoyment. The Clubhouse! God knew, he'd never expected to see a race from here. You could see a mile in the latening afternoon light; drowze back in your comfortable chair and dream about the old days at the Spa—

"They're off!"

—about the old days at the Spa when the great hotels were in their glory and their long galleries, soft with gaslight, echoed to the page-calls of great names and the laughter of delightful women—

"At the quarter—Sir Prize—Gallant Breeze—Anphytrian—El Dorado—"

Tod Sloan had been around here, then, and Bet-A-Million Gates. You could almost see them now, down there in the boxes. There, too, on the terrace he'd glimpsed Pittsburgh Phil and Diamond Jim Brady and the incomparable Lillian Russell. "We'll sit there with them some day, Laura," he'd promised. "You'll see." If only Laura were here with him now—

"At the half—Sir Prize—Gallant Breeze—El Dorado—Anphytrian—"

—here with him while his ship came in, to cheer and hold his hand for him and experience with him this thrill. She might understand, then, why he'd stuck it out all these years—it might be harder now to explain. But he could explain, all right. He was going to telegraph Laura right after this race; tell her all the things he'd wanted to tell her; buy her all those things a woman ought to have; make up for—

"At the three-quarters—Sir Prize— El Dorado—Gallant Breeze—Anphytrian—"

—for all those years of scraping and pinching. Rented rooms and dodging from cheap hotels. Lean lunch-counters and that Christmas when he'd had to pawn her present from the tree. He'd make up for that now, a thousand times over; he'd make up for everything. They'd have a small house somewhere and a neat little car; perhaps run over to Bermuda for a holiday.

"Come on, Sir Prize!"—"Go it, Eldorado!"—"Yaaaaaay!"

She would understand how he'd earned it, too. Earned it by years of loneliness and miles of aching road, nights in flop houses, hours over mop and pail, cadging a meal here, fighting for a nickle there—such penury, hard work, self denial and abstinence as few successful business men ever endured. But unlike men of business he'd never hired or fired, never ground down a competitor, climbed over a friend or sold a fellow-man for money. His business had been Luck; if he'd sold out anyone it had only been himself.

All that was over now, and he was through. He'd learned discipline; knew when to quit. This was enough—not many business men satisfied to retire with twenty thousand dollars—there it was—El Dorado coming in! They were bunched at the finish, but he could see it clearly—Number Four pounding alongside Sir Prize—a storm of hoofbeats and clouds—El Dorado nosing out the Number Six to win by a leg across the line.

"El Dorado! El Dorado!"

Shouts melded into a drawn-out roar; in the grandstand they were whistling, stamping; the clubhouse was on its feet; Number Four was in. There was an excited crush

around the judge's stand; people milled and cheered, drowning the strident voice of the loud-speaker. Only Fortunatus Smith sat calm. Remote in the uproar, he remained quietly in his seat, relaxed, smiling, hands folded across his breast, gaze dreaming toward the westering sun. No true gambler exults at winning; Fortunatus Smith was only grateful. The shouting meant nothing to him; he did not join the crowd clamoring around the winning horses; the noise and hurlyburly seemed very far away, and it was pleasant to sit there in the emptying upper tiers and contemplate Tomorrow in the sundown. The sun slanted warm on his features, gilding his hands. He felt drowzy and comfortable and happy, and the view across the park was magnificent where the West opened gates of gold.

"JEEPERS!" the clean-up boy dropped his broom and stumbled backwards against the clubhouse attendant. "It's some old bum—how'd he ever get in here? —an' look at that fistfull of tickets he's clutchin' to his chest. Number Fours! He musta went around and picked up all the discarded fifty-dollar tickets on El Dorado!"

"He musta been nuts," the clubhouse attendant said.

But the old man didn't hear them. He didn't see the clean-up boy and the clubhouse attendant. He was staring off into the sunset at the last thing his eyes had seen—the Saratoga track and the pluming fountain and the flower gardens painted in gold light. Bunched horses were pounding down the home stretch, and El Dorado was crossing the finish line, and Laura was somewhere in the distance beyond—Laura on a white porch screened with honeysuckle, waiting with open arms.

The old man didn't see the evening paper, either. The *Blade,* for example. The sports writer made a lot of smart cracks, but the sports writer hadn't laid money on the race and so had nothing to lose.

"The whole day was off at Saratoga, what with one dizzy upset after another. In the Seventh it was Jock Bleakly riding Mr. Dudley Hammerstein's El Dorado. El Dorado made a surprising overhand in the contest, scampering past Anphytrian and Gallant Breeze to out flank H. W. Bronson's Sir Prize. Two yards from the judges it appeared as though Sir Prize was going to be surprised and El Dorado was sure winner. Then El Dorado swerved to take the inside rail, and in swerving seemed to have dented a fender on Gallant Breeze which finished fourth.

"After the race Gallant Breeze's jockey was unable to dismount. Aided by his valet and at least two thousand fans who crowded to his assistance, he limped to the clerk of the scales and lodged a complaint of foul against El Dorado. The stewards as well as the patrol judges had watched the contest closely and were inclined to believe the fourth-placer had been sideswiped. Immediate examination proved that Gallant Breeze's jockey had suffered a broken ankle, that Gallant Breeze had been bumped by El Dorado several times and that the collisions were apparently deliberate. Among loud cheers from the winners and wails from the losers, the race was awarded to Sir Prize, Gallant Breeze and Anphytrian. El Dorado was disqualified.

The Waving of the Flags Meant Very Little to Him—and the Blowing of the Bugles Was but the Voice of Authority Yelling Commands; Yet—the Most Hardened Cynic Is Liable to a Change of Heart . . .

FREE FRENCHMAN

By HUGH B. CAVE

ALMOST anything could happen in this place. War-born El Chazzar was first cousin to an American boom town, and the Arab's den was Egyptian step-brother to a boom-town honkey tonk.

Levasseur leaned at the bar and watched with one listless eye the languid movements of the dancing girls, for whom tonight was the last. What does a dancing girl do in Egypt, he wondered, when suddenly confronted with an order to move on?

Smith, the American oil man who had been drinking Egypt dry since caught in

Alexandria by Italy's war move, was telling noisy American stories to a handful of Tommies from His Majesty's Army of the Nile, while the Turkish manager of the dancing girls slept in a corner. Levasseur's eye gleamed. He himself was being watched by the English archeologist, Brightman, who was neither English nor an archeologist, and whose other name was more guttural.

Pseudo Oriental music wailed through the place, and the slender young man with the anxious face had found his way at last to Levasseur's side. Having ordered whiskey and accepted bottle and glass from the keep, he turned and said gently, "You are Paul Levasseur, are you not?"

Levasseur looked at him.

"I came here in search of you," the slender one declared.

Levasseur still looked in silence.

"I understand—that is to say, I have heard it whispered that your sympathies are with England's enemies. Or rather, my friend, that you think first of your pockets."

Levasseur's shrug disturbed a fly roosting near his brown neck. Others had heard it whispered, he knew, that for a price Paul Levasseur would do almost anything. Well, and why not? After five years in the Legion you are no longer an infant. The waving of the flags means very little, and the blowing of bugles is but a voice of authority yelling commands.

You have an appetite to consider, and a future of sorts to nourish. Furthermore, you are French, and if the creaking ancients at Vichy could not with all their wisdom decide for which side to fight, how could a mere Legionnaire be expected to know the answer?

"I listen to any man who has money," Levasseur said honestly.

"Good! But is this a safe place to listen?"

"As safe as any."

The slender one sipped his whiskey and gazed about him as though to convey the impression that he and the tall Frenchman at his side were discussing nothing of great importance. He was quite young, Levasseur observed. Twenty-five, perhaps; certainly not a day more. As for nationality, his speech and manner were as English as Cheshire, but a pale Englishman is white, and this young man, though pale and patently anxious, was not without a hint of swarthiness. Still—the Egyptian sun could make a man swarthy.

"For a price, Levasseur, you will escort me past the patrols to Graziani?"

Levasseur pursed his lips. "That is a large order, mon ami!"

"But you can do it?"

"I can swim the Nile whirlpools if there is gold on the other side," the Frenchman said, shrugging.

THE slender one moved closer, imperceptibly, and Levasseur felt a hand touching his, pressing a roll of bills against him. He guided the roll to his pocket, knew by the feel of it that it represented a sizeable sum, even if each and every note was of low denomination.

"When," the man beside him asked, "do we leave? And how?"

"It will take some thought."

"Thought, perhaps, but not too much time for thinking, I hope."

"Tomorrow night, then."

"Good!"

"And your name?" Levasseur asked gently.

"At the moment," the slender one replied, a smile touching his lips, "Thomas Purrington, Southampton tourist unhappily stranded in Egypt by the spread of the war, and so anxious to return to home and family."

He set his glass down. "Tomorrow night, Levasseur." Past the dancing girls he went, past the watching Brightman, and out into the chill Egyptian night.

"Through the lines," Levasseur murmured, "to Graziani." Thinking about it, he shrugged. Had he not escorted other axis agents over the desert, past the danger

points of detection? It was a finicky piece of business, to be sure. Careful planning was required, and much depended on the man being escorted, on his poise and his ability to endure hardship, for El Chazzar was a war town in a vast expanse of desert; the nights were uncomfortably cold, and British planes patroled in daylight. And always, of course, there was danger of encountering marauding Senoussi from Libya, in whom the war had stirred to life savage lusts dormant these many years. Still, it could be done—

LEVASSEUR moved without haste through the wailing music to where the Turkish manager of the dancing girls sat sleeping. Laughter from the Tommies eddied about him. He stooped and touched the Turk's shoulder.

"You move on tomorrow, Hassim, no?"

Glumly the Turk nodded, and a sigh came deeply on wings of anise from far inside him. "This stupid war," he said. "First I am told there is need for girls and entertainment where the soldiers are gathered. The profit will be wonderful, I am informed. So I pack my chicks into a bus; I bring them here across the desert. I plan a tour that will take us to El Maghra, Matruh, Sidi Barrani perhaps, and to Siwa for the date harvest. And now what? Now there is all this talk of enemy agents, and my chicks are looked upon with suspicion. Dancing girls, I am told, are undesirable. Being nomads, they are likely to be tempted to sell information to the enemy. So I must go to Siwa direct, arriving there too soon and losing money." Hassim rubbed his plump hands together and sighed over them, gravely shaking his head. "This stupid war, Levasseur!"

"You have a driver for your bus?"

"I have a driver—myself I can drive—but who will sell me the petrol?"

"I will, Hassim," Levasseur said quietly.

"You?"

"On two conditions. First, that one of your girls be left behind, to follow later. Second, that I do the driving and select the route."

The face of the Turk grew dark with distrust. "There is but one route to Siwa, Levasseur."

"One road, you mean. But I may not always stick to it. So long as you get to Siwa without mishap, you have no complaint."

"But this girl I must leave behind. Who is she?"

"That's up to you. Any one will do."

"I see," said Hassim. For an instant his gaze lifted and he studied Levasseur through long, still lashes. He, too, of course, had heard it whispered that the Frenchman, for a price—

"We leave tomorrow night, Hassim. Before then, I'll talk to you again."

Levasseur went out, not failing to note that Brightman, the "archeologist," had already departed. He was glad to be out. The music had annoyed him, as well as the troubled stares of the girls while he had conversed with their manager. In no great hurry, Levasseur walked through the chill desert night, into the darkness that deepened as the lights and sounds dimmed behind.

Aware of this acute silence all about him, Levasseur picked his way through the rubble of ancient walls and pavements in the midst of which stood the mud hut, relic of pre-war El Chazzar, which was his home. He struck a match on his thumbnail to light a cigarette, and bent to open the door, then came erect with catlike quickness and had a hand on the Luger at his hip.

"There is no need for alarm," Brightman said softly, emerging from the dark.

The Frenchman let fall his hand, but not his stare. Under his breath he replied tersely, "The desert is a bit too close here, Herr Ruhlmann. When you have fought the devils of the desert as I have, you are sensitive to shadows that move with too much stealth."

"The name is Brightman, Levasseur! How often must I warn you?"

LEVASSEUR opened his door and stood aside to let the German enter. He made a light, offering his guest a drink which the German refused. Sipping his own liquor, Levasseur said at last, "Well, *mon ami?*"

The agent with whom you talked a while ago," Ruhlmann said. "He is not one of us. He is English, and a clever spy."

"So?"

"He was flown to Alexandria from Athens in a British Sunderland, and from there to El Maghra in a Blenheim bomber, and traveled most of the rest of the way to this place in a car of the Camel Corps. Do you know why?"

"I have not the slightest notion," said Levasseur, sipping steadily.

"Because the English are determined to close the door through which military information is reaching Graziani. He propositioned you, did he not?"

"He did."

"You see! They suspect you, Levasseur! Do you realize what would have happened, had I not warned you in time?"

"Tell me, Herr Ruhlmann."

"This scheming devil would have led you straight into the hands of his English comrades. You would have been caught red-handed, court-martialed, shot as an enemy spy!"

Levasseur looked at the agitated German and smiled. "And that would give you an anxious moment, eh? Through me, perhaps, they would reach out for you."

"But you will not be caught, Levasseur. You are too wary. And I, too, have a proposition."

"So?"

"This Englishman is dangerous. Get rid of him and your reward will be great, not to mention the satisfaction that will be yours in having aided our cause so nobly."

Levasseur bent his brows in a frown. Where, he wondered, was this deep understanding of fellow men so often bragged about by Ruhlmann and his kind? Was a human life something to be sold like cheese over the counter, simply because one belonged to a so-called "inferior" race?

"My services do not include murder, Ruhlmann," Levasseur said coolly, "and as for your cause, my interest is solely in Paul Levasseur. I'm French. In this scrap between the English and the axis, I don't care a fig who comes out on top."

Herr Ruhlmann devoted some time to thinking this over, then smiled faintly, showing his teeth. "You don't believe then, that he is an English spy?"

"I don't care whether he is or not," said Levasseur. "He has paid me to take him to Graziani, and I'll take him."

"You fool! You'll be caught!"

"I don't think so."

Herr Ruhlmann studied the Frenchman's face. He said at last, "I see. You plan to take precautions. May I ask how you and the Englishman will travel?"

"By bus."

"By bus. I begin to understand. Have you room for another passenger—at a most attractive price?"

"It might be arranged."

"Good," the German said, rising. "Suppose we arrange it."

LEVASSEUR appeared to be no more active than usual the following day, yet accomplished much. With Hassim he went to the quarters of the dancing girls, and came away with a bundle. He then visited Purrington, issued instructions and delivered his bundle. Later in the day he rode with Hassim in the latter's bus to one of the two independent petrol dealers in El Chazzar, and for a surprisingly small sum had the tank filled to capacity. The dealer, an Egyptian, seemed anxious to please.

The bus was later left at the rear of the Arab's place, and Hassim hurried to the proper officials to report that he was leaving, as ordered, immediately after the evening performance, so as to cover as much of the distance as possible during the hours of coolness.

Hassim made a little speech at the Arab's as the time of departure drew near. A sorrowful speech, with tears streaming. With appropriate timidity he slid the sun-helmet of an English Tommy off the bar and passed it around, upside down, letting his tears fall into the collection. Levasseur watched and smiled. Herr Ruhlmann watched without smiling. Purrington was not there.

When it was over, Levasseur waited by the bus outside, in the dark. The starry night was cold; the desert lay gleaming, all flat here and all sand—later there would be wind-cut dunes resembling a thousand different shapes; there would be barren, wind-swept plateaus of shale, and vultures and jackals, and perhaps the following feet of swift camels bearing desert devils bent on murder.

Levasseur's nostrils quivered. He lived for this sort of thing. Now and then the ethics of his business affairs disturbed him, but with plans complete and money in his pockets he could shed this discomfort and think only of the physical glow of danger. Wars were trivial things at best. The desert was here always.

Out of the dark came Hassim with his chicks, six of them, no longer houris but demure and worried young ladies with small suitcases. All but one. This one, the last in line, paused beside Levasseur when the latter spoke his name.

"Your gun, if you please, M'sieu," Levasseur said softly. "If need arises on the desert it shall be returned to you, but I want no excuse for trouble on this journey."

The Englishman shrugged, and in doing so looked less like a girl. Sweater and skirt fit him well, and his legs were not conspicuously thick, nor his padded chest too flat, nor his wig too obvious. With a shrewd glance at Levasseur's face and a moment's hesitation, he thrust a hand through a slit in his skirt and produced a pistol, which he handed over butt first.

"As you say, Levasseur."

"Thank you, *mon ami.*"

Purrington took his place with the girls, and Hassim climbed into the seat beside the driver's. Now from the rear door of the Arab's place came Herr Ruhlmann, and Levasseur moved to meet him also.

"You will entrust your weapons to me, Herr Ruhlmann, until we reach the end of our journey."

The German stiffened. "Why?"

"I want no trouble."

Ruhlmann's scowl was not pleasant. Cunning himself, he was quick to sense evidence of cunning in others. "You have the Englishman's gun also?" he snapped.

"I have, Herr Ruhlmann—and with yours in my pocket, too, I'll have an easier conscience. I've told you before, this war means nothing to me. I want no part of it."

Ruhlmann's abrupt surrender of his Luger was in the nature of a challenge, a bodily snarl of anger. Having relinquished the gun and stood rigid while Levasseur's fingers lightly probed his clothing, he turned his back in eloquent silence and entered the bus, taking a seat behind Hassim.

Levasseur sighed softly at the sleepy town, with its palms black and restless against the stars. He breathed in the night and looked west. "Well," he said carelessly, adjusting himself at the wheel, "we're off."

El Chazzar was many miles behind before talk disturbed the spell of that gorgeous night. Sand and sky were of silver, and in the bright whiteness of the moon a man could tell the color of his neighbor's eyes. Now Ruhlmann, with a glance to the rear, leaned forward and touched his blunt chin to Levasseur's shoulder, and spoke in a whisper.

"The Englishman knows the route we take?"

"He thinks he knows," Levasseur smiled. "If he has arranged a reception committee for us, they will be disappointed by a good many miles."

The German nodded, leaning back. Has-

sim had produced a bottle and passed it to him, but he refused.

Levasseur did not refuse. He grinned and helped himself to a generous swig, driving with his knees while tilting the bottle to his mouth. Hassim drank, then swayed down the aisle to pass the bottle to his chicks. "Enjoy yourselves," he said. "We have a long way to go."

Levasseur wondered why the Englishman, Purrington, had not taken account of the fact that the road, such as it was, was no longer beneath them—that they had swung northward along a caravan trail and were having no little difficulty with drifted sand on a broad belt of shale. Was the Englishman less clever than Ruhlmann seemed to believe, or was he a sort of fellow who took things as they came, without comment?

El Chazzar was far behind, and this treacherous detour would eat up another dozen miles before returning them to the road beyond the abandoned rest house and dried up wells of Bir Sher. At Bir Sher the Englishman's reception committee no doubt lay in wait, to catch Levasseur red handed at this delicate game of running foreign agents through the desert to Libya. It would be a chagrined reception committee, Levasseur reflected, inwardly smiling. The wait would be arduous.

Hassim handed him the bottle again.

AS FOR the rest of it, he would deposit Purrington across the border in the vicinity of Giarabub. If he were stopped by the British border patrol—or by Graziani's—why, he had simply lost his way. Imagine it, Levasseur lost in the desert, with a Turk, an English archeologist, and a bus load of bewildered chicks!

There might be trouble with Ruhlmann if they were stopped, but it was not likely. To the English he was an archeologist, free to go where he pleased. If the Italians became curious about him, he could no doubt make himself known with little difficulty. Everything, Levasseur assured himself, would run as smoothly as Hassim's anise, and having deposited the Englishman and Herr Ruhlmann in Libya, and safely escorted Hassim and his chicks back to Siwa, he himself would perhaps remain in Siwa for the harvest. He was behind in his drinking, and had not kissed a pretty girl in months.

Herr Ruhlmann, of course, would not like this. His sole object in signing on as passenger was to destroy the Englishman. He might wait until the border was behind them, but more likely he would shortly suggest a halt in the desert—a chance to stretch a leg—in search of an opportunity to carry out his mission before complications could develop.

But there would be no halt. On that, Levasseur had made up his mind.

"We French are out of this mess," he mused. "Why we are out, God only knows, with many a brave Frenchman sick for a chance to fight. But the wise men of Vichy surely know best—and who am I but a lout of a one-time Legionnaire, admittedly with no brain or conscience?"

Ruhlmann leaned toward him. "That anise you drink is poison, Levasseur. Try this."

He held a pint bottle under the Frenchman's nose, and Levasseur looked down at it. "I think not, M'sieu. Mixing them is bad."

The German was annoyed, but did not drink himself. The bottle, Levasseur noted, went back into his pocket, to stay there. "Perhaps he would like very much to get me drunk," the Frenchman reflected, "or even to poison me. I am in his way. But why has he not suggested a halt along here, where the dunes are high?"

A rifle cracked. On the heels of that crisp, bright sound came the noisy bursting of a tire, and Levasseur momentarily lost his grip on the wheel. Applying the brakes, he said distinctly, "On the floor, *mes amis,* all of you!" and set them an example by sliding to his knees as the bus bumped to a stop.

"There are little devils walking the desert tonight," he said then, calmly. "We have had a tire shot out." Protected by the sides of the bus and the high metal cowl of its engine he risked a cautious look through the bottom inch of the windshield, and saw only the starlight dunes and their sidewalls of shadow—a scene as peaceful and barren as could be imagined.

Then he saw a rifle barrel, slender and black, nuzzling the crest of a dune, and behind it a face and robed shoulders.

Levasseur lowered his head abruptly, and a bullet starred the windshield an inch or two from where his nose had been. "Very good shooting," he observed. "And of course he isn't alone. They are probably Senoussi from Libya, and the Senoussi never raid alone. We're in for it."

He drew his gun and glanced at Hassim, who was big-eyed with terror. No help there, Levasseur decided. He glanced at Herr Ruhlmann and did not like the German's expression, or more properly the lack of it. The Englishman, Purrington, had left the chicks at the rear and was crawling down the aisle on hands and knees, soulfully damning his skirt.

"They may attack," Levasseur said, "and then again they may wait for the moon to be less bright—if they know we are without a radio." He frowned again at Ruhlmann and the Englishman, and knew that he must now make a delicate and dangerous decision.

Alone, he could not hope to do much against the attacking devils out there. But did he dare return to these two their weapons?

Delicate situation indeed! The German no doubt distrusted and hated him for having demanded the weapons in the first place. Moreover, these Nazi agents were a peculiar lot, demanding dog-like obedience from those who served them—and Levasseur's indifference, his near disdain, had put many an odd glint in Herr Ruhlmann's eyes. Given a gun, might not the German turn it first on Paul Levasseur?

It would be a foolish move, to be sure, with the Senoussi about to attack and every man so sorely needed, but Herr Ruhlmann, like so many of his kind, was pig-headed.

"A ticklish business," Levasseur thought gravely.

THE Senoussi postponed the necessity of his solving it by failing to attack. Strange, this failure. Odder still their neglect to rain bullets at the bus from the security of their position. To be sure, rifles cracked occasionally, and bullets whanged against the vehicle's sides, richocheting with long drawn out screeches that hurt the ears; but this was nothing. For what were they waiting?

"They don't fight like any desert devils I've encountered before," Levasseur observed to the Englishman at his side.

Purrington nodded but did not answer. He had not asked for his gun. He had merely put himself in a position to take it, with the least possible delay, when the Frenchman elected to hand it to him.

Herr Ruhlmann had not done that. He had crawled over the quaking bulk of Hassim and was now close to the door, where he had hauled his shirt up from his trousers and was tearing it.

"Do as little shooting as you can for the next few minutes," Ruhlmann said, a hint of command in his clipped tone. "I have a plan."

Levasseur and the Englishman frowned at him, and saw that he had wound a strip of his white shirt about his head in a sort of turban; that he was fastening still another strip, flag-like, to a spade handle he had dragged from under the seats.

"You're going out there?"

"If I can get close enough to talk to them," the German declared, "perhaps I can convince them they've made a mistake."

"That may be a large order, friend!"

"Perhaps. But I've an ace up my sleeve."

Levasseur watched him in troubled silence. Back of this move of Herr Ruhl-

mann's lay a significance that outweighed the move itself, but what was it?

The German was gone. Quick and with magnificent courage he had flicked open the door and dropped to the sand, where he was now erect, holding the white flag high as he walked toward the dunes.

"He hasn't a chance!" Purrington whispered. "Those devils don't know the meaning of a white flag!"

That was it! He had put into words the elusive thought that had been gnawing at the edges of Levasseur's mental groping. A velvet-soft curse leaped from the Frenchman's lips. He slapped a gun into the Englishman's hand — Purrington's own gun, it happened to be—and was erect in the same movement. One long stride took him over Hassim to the door.

"Come back, Ruhlmann!"

The German saw him coming, and behaved strangely. Yelling not at Levasseur but at those hidden devils in the dunes, he lowered his head and broke into a run, with the Frenchman after him. Rifles spat, and Levasseur in long-legged pursuit felt a bullet fan his cheek, staggered and knew that he was hit. But he caught the German and dragged him down.

A black moment for Levasseur, that one! Black as ever he had known. Their sniping thwarted by danger of hitting the German, the Senoussi sprang into the open and attacked in a yelling wave, while Ruhlmann put up a fight that left Levasseur no free hand for gunplay.

He had the German by an arm and a leg, and hauled him, with the night full of wild yelling from a score of robed devils.

But now the howling Senoussi caught bullets in their teeth, for Purrington, at a window of the bus, was using his pistol with telling effect. Caught in the open, the devils faltered. Some came on, grotesquely, to kiss the sand. Others knelt to return the Englishman's fire. One man reached Levasseur and swung his rifle, and for his pains was blinded by the Frenchman's fist.

Levasseur flung the German into the bus and at once dropped to his knees beside Purrington, with gun out and blazing. A good shot, Paul Levasseur. The Senoussi were no fools in the face of such shooting. They scattered, and there was a lull.

Hassim came off the floor with a heavy sigh of relief, and the girls at the rear ceased sobbing. Levasseur hauled the German to his feet.

"We have a tire that needs changing if we are to get out of here alive, *mon ami,* and you, I think, are the one to change it. If the Senoussi shoot you, that is your own sorrow, since you ordered them here in the first place."

Herr Ruhlman had been dragged face-down across sand and sharp shale, and was not a lovely sight. Nevertheless he drew himself up and swelled his chest. "You lie, Levasseur!"

"I thought it odd," Levasseur observed, "that these raiders chose this particular spot for ambush, since the road is some eight or nine miles to the south of us. Either they followed us from El Chazzar, *mon ami*—which is not likely—or you were clever enough to anticipate our route and told them where to lie in wait for us. And then, Herr Ruhlmann, you used the white flag, which from a pack of raiding Senoussi should bring only a loud laugh of derision —but these fellows were noble in their respect of it."

Herr Ruhlmann looked at the Frenchman's fists and was silent.

"It was a clever scheme to get rid of the Englishman and me," Levasseur went on, a trifle grimly. "I don't hold it against you on that score, *mon ami.* What I dislike is your cold-blooded indifference to the fate of these girls. The Senoussi are not kind to women, and you know it. No doubt the girls were to be a reward for services rendered this night." He took hold of the German's shirt and lightly shook him. "War is war, Herr Ruhlmann, but if that is the sort of thing your Feuhrer teaches you, I may soon lose my indiffer-

ence. Go change the tire. Change it quickly, and if you run away you will be shot."

Herr Ruhlmann was not eager to kneel there on the starlit sand, wrestling a pair of heavy wheels, but he did so, being careful to make his turban of white shirting as conspicuous as possible. Perspiration stung his sand-bitten face and made his hands click. Fear kept him trembling. But the pistols aimed at him from the bus were more real to him than the rifles of the hidden Senoussi, and he kept at it.

Levasseur said to the Englishman, "It will not work, of course. They are bewildered for a time, but if the tire is changed and we try to drive on, they'll simply shoot out the rest of our tires. However, it's winning us time, and time may be worth something if your friends are waiting at Bir Sher, as I suspect."

"There are soldiers at Bir Sher," the Englishman replied frankly. "You think they'll have heard the shooting?"

"I hope so," said Levasseur simply.

Herr Ruhlmann finished his task and stood up, all eagerness to get back into the bus. A rifle cracked. The tire he had put on exploded almost under his hands.

He half turned, his fists clenched in rage. Shouting at the dunes, he took an angry step forward, and the rifle cracked again. Herr Ruhlmann caught at his face and fell.

"Too bad," Levasseur said. "I had hoped to push him around a bit, to teach him a lesson. They're coming. Ready?"

THEY came, a dozen of them, turbanned devils full of rum, yelling their heads off. The girls huddled against the seats at the rear of the bus, and Hassim wailed prayers. Levasseur and Purrington moved apart, to be two targets instead of one, and quietly kneeling, cut some of the attackers down.

Others, a vengeful handful, reached their objective and were fighting at door and windows when the first of the armored cars slewed over the dunes, machine-guns talking. They fled and were cut down, falling in dirty heaps. After that, the desert seemed weirdly quiet, the stars brighter.

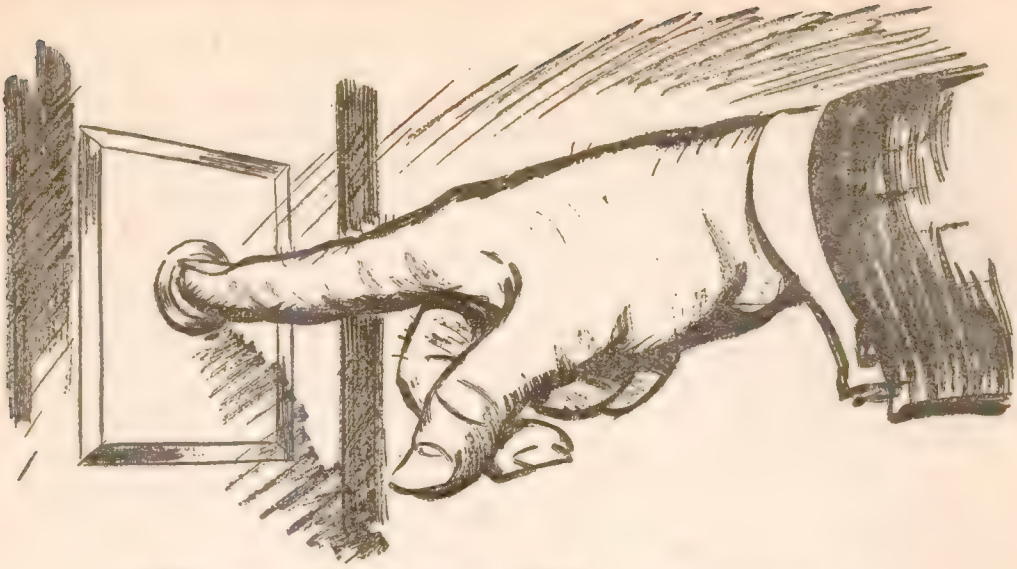
Levasseur, half in the bus and half out of it, dragged himself back and leaned against the wheel to wipe blood and sweat from his eyes. He smiled, weakly waving a hand, as the Englishman turned to help him, and then one of Hassim's chicks fell upon him, smothering him with kisses.

Very nice, Levasseur thought, putting an arm around her. He had not fondled a pretty girl in ages. He looked at Purrington and laughed, for the Englishman, too, was being embraced without restraint. Then there were other Englishmen in the bus, officers of His Majesty's Army of the Nile, serious young fellows very straight and slim in their uniforms, all talking at once.

Levasseur let his head fall upon a soft bosom and caressed the slender arms that encircled his neck, while with one eye he watched Purrington in earnest conversation with the new arrivals. One of them asked Purrington a question, and the Englishman vigorously shook his head.

"A mistake," Purrington said. "All a mistake, gentlemen. Once or twice—a few careless acts, perhaps—but I assure you the man is a loyal Frenchman."

Levasseur saw that they were looking at him. He put his girl aside and, grinning, went up to them. "M'sieu is right," he declared. "I am a Frenchman. But I am a little tired of the life I lead, mes amis. In the Legion, before the old men of Vichy put their manes together, there was fighting, and there was in the blood something that made a man throw out his chest. Perhaps you have a legion, too. If so, Paul Levasseur would be very happy to join it."



THE LAST DOORBELL

By JOHN K. VEDDER

IT WAS the last doorbell on the street and it belonged to a commuter's dream, a white Cape Cod cottage with green shutters and a white picket fence completely surrounding the house and lot.

The realtors couldn't have selected, for their advertising, a more appropriate housewife than the one who answered Frank Sargent's ring on the doorbell. Her hair was a soft chestnut, only recently waved. She had the features and complexion of the Camel cigarette girl.

She had a figure, too.

Frank Sargent looked at her and felt resentment toward the man who had taken this girl out of circulation. He drew in his breath slowly and said:

"Good afternoon, Madam. I represent the Trotter Institute of Public Opinion—I beg your pardon?"

"I said I wasn't interested."

"But I'm not selling anything. I merely want to ask you a few questions. You know—the Trotter Poll."

"Please," the photogenic housewife said. "Not now."

She winced as a masculine voice called from inside the house. Sargent heard the words and he said, with dignity:

"I'm not selling brushes."

"I know, but my husband—oh!"

The husband came up behind his wife. His face appeared over her shoulder and Sargent recoiled a step.

It was the meanest, angriest face he had seen in many days. The face of a misanthrope.

"What the hell do you want?" the man snarled.

"Uh, er, ah, information," Sargent stammered. "You see, I represent the Trotter Poll and—"

"The Trotter Poll? That lousy outfit that said Willkie was going to be elected? I said last November that I'd skin a Trotter poll man if I ever saw one and damned if I haven't a good mind right now—"

"What is your occupation, sir?" Sargent cut in.

"Trade paper editor. . . . what the hell business is it of yours?"

"None, but we want a cross section of American life. To get the correct opinion—"

"Correct? Were you correct last November? Why you crooks ought to be put out of business. You've got no more right to conduct a poll than Ben Chapman has being a publisher, the low-down, yellow-bellied, lying, cheating, double-crossing, stinking—ahrr—!" That was as far as the resident of the commuter's dream could get. He began choking and coughing. Froth came to his lips and he pawed the air in frantic swipes. His wife threw her arms about him and tried valiantly to push him into the house.

"Please!" she cried over her shoulder to Sargent. "Please go away. You're upsetting him. His nerves—"

"My nerves!" howled the husband. "To hell with my nerves. Stand up and fight like a man, you dirty swine. Come back here, you—"

That was as much as Sargent heard, for two reasons. One, because he was already opening the gate by the sidewalk at the moment, and two, because the beautiful young housewife had finally managed to shove her husband inside the house.

FROM a safe distance, Sargent regarded the house. He shook his head and said, emphatically, "Whew!"

He crossed the street and picked out a house at random and when a middle-aged woman came to the door went into his routine.

"Since Labor has the right to organize for collective bargaining without hindrance of the employer is it your opinion that men in the service, soldiers, sailors and marines, should also be permitted to unionize and bargain for better wages and working conditions?"

. . . and Was Plunged into a Welter of Intrigue and Sudden Death!

The woman blinked in astonishment and Sargent was compelled to repeat the question. When he received a hesitant reply he wrote the answer gravely on his chart and asked his second question:

"Since men on Relief or WPA are accepting largess from the government is it your opinion that they should be inducted into the service, in preference to taxpayers whose money has made it possible for the Relief and WPA subsidy?"

Again Sargent got a stammering, hesitant reply and he cursed, for the hundredth time, the brass hats of the home office who had an uncanny knack of phrasing the simplest questions in the most difficult, complicated sentences.

He made a deliberate job of filling in the case history of the quiz subject, then asked, casually: "By the way, can you tell me the name of the people in the white house across the street?"

Oh, that's the Pelkeys. A very nice young couple, although I do believe Mr. Pelkey has lost his position, as he's been home all week and he never was off other days."

"He's an editor, isn't he?"

"Why, he's some sort of newspaper man. I'm not sure exactly what he does. They drive a small car and Mrs. Pelkey does her own work, you know. They can't have such a very good income, I imagine. Although Mrs. Pelkey is an awfully attractive young woman."

"Her name is Diana, isn't it?"

"Diana? Oh, no. Hester. His name is Ernest. A nice man, but a bit quick-tempered at times. I'm not one to gossip, you know, but living practically across the street I can't help but hear—well, his voice has been a bit sharp at times. Especially, lately. Mmm, I wonder if the poor man is ill. I never thought of that. I must stop by sometime. Yes—"

"Thank you, Madam," said Sargent, politely.

Walking down the street, Sargent consulted his chart. "That gives me enough housewives for today. Now, I need three business men of the medium upper brackets. Say, the owner of a fair-sized store, perhaps a LaSalle Street broker and, umm, a publisher." A crooked grin twisted his mouth. "A trade journal publisher."

THE offices of *Business Journals, Incorporated,* were in the Dockery Building, which was on Wells Street, near Harrison. The Dockery had been quite a building when it had been erected after the Big Fire. It contained an open grillework elevator, manually operated by pulling a rope.

Business Journals, Incorporated, was on the fourth floor. The offices consisted of one large room, which had been divided into numerous cubicles by partitions that did not reach the ceiling.

A red-headed girl with a goodly amount of oomph was sitting at a rickety desk trying to decipher shorthand notes from her book.

She seemed glad of an interruption. "What can I do for you?"

"I'd like to see Mr. Ben O. Chapman. I represent the—Trotter Institute of Public Opinion. The Trotter Poll, you know—"

"Oh, you ask questions! And do you listen, too? Then you're just the man for Ben. He'll tell you the story of his life. Just a mo'."

Sargent stared after the redhead as she swung her hips to an office that was the last on the left-hand side. She went in and came out after only a moment.

"Okay," she called.

Sargent walked down the aisle between the rows of cubicles. The doors of most of them were open and he caught a glimpse of a couple of youngish chaps huddled over desks, littered with books, magazines and printers' proofs.

THEN he entered the office of Ben O. Chapman. The business journal publisher was slumped in a swivel chair, toying with a large pair of shears. He was a tall, pasty-faced man with thinning blond hair

and the fishiest eyes Sargent had ever seen.

"My secretary said you represent some poll," Chapman said.

"That's right, the Trotter Institute of Public Opinion. If I could have a few moments of your time—"

"Well, I'm pretty busy, but go ahead. I didn't believe you people actually had men on the road, judging from the ridiculous reports you release from time to time. Now, you take the presidential poll. Anyone could have told you that the rich people were for Willkie and the poor for Roosevelt, and since there are more poor people than rich, the result was a foregone conclusion."

"The Institute doesn't pretend to forecast an exact opinion," Sargent interposed. "Despite the precision of our sampling, we allow four percent for reasonable error, and—"

"Four percent isn't close enough," Ben Chapman cut in. "Not on important topics of the day. You've got to get it within one-tenth of one percent to make your poll worthwhile. I learned that years ago. I conducted a poll of my own, when I was running the *Sugar Beet Review*. I wanted to find out whether people knew the difference between our domestic beet sugar and imported cane sugar. So, when I found out that the sugar beet industry was fighting a losing battle I got rid of the *Sugar Beet Review*.

"I never keep a magazine in a declining industry. I lost money on the *Sugar Beet Review*. Just a year before I sold it I turned down an offer of thirty thousand dollars. The biggest mistake I ever made in my life. A year later I gave the book away for five thousand dollars.

"I've been publishing trade papers for twenty-five years and you never can tell how a business is going. I've got a little turkey paper here, now, that's an up and comer. It doesn't carry very much advertising at the present time, but I'm keeping it going because of the subscriptions. Two hundred a month, voluntarily. When you get a magazine like that you've got something."

"I'm sure of it," said Sargent, "but if you don't mind, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions."

"First, I want to ask *you* something," Chapman interrupted, "do you make a living at what you're doing? Now you take trade journals. They took a nose-dive during the depression, but they're coming back.

"I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll start you out with thirty dollars and if you make good, I'll raise you to thirty-five after a couple of months. You'll have complete charge of the magazine. I always give a man complete charge. If he makes good he gets the credit. If he flops—I know who to blame."

"But I'm not looking for a job!" Sargent cried, desperately. "I represent the Trotter Institute of—"

"Of course. I picked up young Thayer on a street corner and made him the best advertising salesman in the business. All I ask of a man is that he give me his loyalty and work no harder than I work myself. I haven't even had a vacation this year. You'd think a man in my position should be able to take off a couple of months every year and travel, but Sligo's not the sort of partner you can trust this business to. Which reminds me, I want you to understand that *I'm* hiring you and you take your orders from me and not Sligo. Understand?"

Sargent pulled out a handkerchief and mopped his forehead. "You mean—you're hiring *me* as an editor?"

"Isn't that what you came here for? I'll start you with thirty-five, which is the most I ever start anyone with. Robertson!"

A tall, dark-complected young fellow of about thirty, stuck his head into the office.

"Robertson, I'm putting this man—by the way, what's your name?"

"Frank Sargent."

"Oh, yes, Sargent. I'm putting Sargent on *Turkey Talk*. Show him Pelkey's office."

Robertson inclined his head at Sargent and the latter followed to a cubicle about eight feet square, containing a battered desk, a swivel chair without casters and an ancient typewriter which stood on the desk.

"Welcome to the menagerie," Robertson said. "I'm Jim Robertson. I handle *The Skating Rink.*"

"That's a trade journal for skaters?"

"No. Rinks. It goes to roller and ice skating rinks. I had a pair of roller skates once when I was a kid." Robertson grinned crookedly. "Ben tell you the story of his life?"

"Eh?"

"Skip it. Well, anything you want to know about the place, I'm next door. Good luck." Sargent was almost sure that Robertson had added, "you'll need it" under his breath, but the editor of *The Skating Rink* left him abruptly.

SARGENT looked at the walls and the desk and finally tested the swivel chair without the casters. The spring was broken and he almost went over backwards. When he regained his balance the red-headed stenographer was in his office.

"I'm Miss O'Kelly," she said. "Mildred to the family. I hear you're one of us."

"So it seems. But look, what do I do?"

"Don't you know? This is Ernie's office, so I imagine you're going to work on *Turkey Talk.*"

"Yes, so I understand. But—what do I do?"

"Why, you edit the magazine."

"Where is it?"

"Oh, just a minute." Mildred O'Kelly popped out of the office, but returned in a moment with a copy of *Turkey Talk.*

It was a fat little magazine, containing sixty-four pages, although rather small in format, six by nine inches, Sargent was to discover later. He turned the first page to the masthead and read the name, *Ernest Pelkey, Managing Editor.*

Obviously, it was a magazine devoted to turkey raising. Sargent supposed that turkeys *were* raised, although he'd never considered the matter before. Come to think of it, he had never seen a live turkey. He had eaten turkey, yes, but he had never seen a real, live turkey in his life.

Then, suddenly, the full import of his situation struck him and he sat in the swivel chair, wide-eyed and open-mouthed. In River Forest he had seen a man on the verge of a nervous breakdown. The man had mentioned the name of Ben O. Chapman and because of idle curiosity—and because it was easier to follow through on even a vague lead than to pick a business man out of a telephone book he had come down to interview Ben O. Chapman. And instead of interviewing him, he had been employed as a trade paper editor.

A voice cut into Sargent's meditations. "You're the new man, eh?"

He looked up at a beetle-browed, broad-shouldered man of about forty. "Why, yes," he said. "My name is Frank Sargent."

"Hmm. Worked on trade journals before?"

"Why, no. Mr. Chapman didn't seem to think that experience was necessary—"

"Oh, he didn't! Well, I'll tell him a thing or two, filling this office with a bunch of schoolboys hardly dry behind the ears."

Sargent reddened, but before he could defend himself or make a retort the beetle-browed man went off. A moment later Sargent heard loud voices in Chapman's office. He couldn't quite distinguish the words until Chapman's voice shrilled:

"I still hold fifty-one percent of the stock, Sligo, and there's nothing you can do about that."

Immediately thereafter a door slammed loudly.

"Yipee!" yelled a rich baritone. "I got him. Signed on the dotted line for six full pages. Old Zuskind himself, the so-and-so! Kiss me, sugar!"

Sargent heard two smacks, the second louder than the first. They were followed by a roar. "She loves me!"

He could almost feel the breeze before the newcomer sailed up to the door of his office and looked in; a short, barrel-chested man of about thirty with hair that was redder even than that of Mildred O'Kelly.

"New man, eh? I'm Lew Thayer, the best damn agate hound in this town. Shake and welcome!"

Sargent took the advertising salesman's hand and winced as Thayer's fist crunched his knuckles.

"See you around, pal," chortled Thayer. "We'll h'ist one together. Gotta tell Ben about Zuskind. He didn't think I could land him, the old skinflint."

Thayer blew off to Chapman's office and Sargent whistled softly. "What a place! Guess I may as well meet the rest of the—the menagerie."

HE GOT up and ventured out of his office. He looked into the adjoining one where Robertson was reading a newspaper, then proceeded forward.

The door of the next office was closed to a crack. As Sargent knocked, he heard a door slammed inside before a hearty voice called, "Come in!"

Sargent pushed open the door. "I'm a new man so I thought I'd introduce myself."

"Sure, sure," said the occupant of the office. "H'arya. I'm Grosvenor Black. You spell it with an 'S' but it's silent—like the 'q' in billiards. Ha-ha! Get it?"

Grosvenor Black had spindly legs topped by a torso that should have belonged to a much bigger man. He was about five feet five. He had a couple of gold teeth in his mouth and enormous pop eyes.

"I'm the new editor of *Turkey Talk,*" Sargent said.

"Of course. Too bad about Pelkey. Always said he took things too serious."

"What happened to him?"

"Don't you know? Had a nervous breakdown. Don't blame him. Place is a madhouse. D'you mind? I gotta run out and see an advertiser."

Grosvenor Black caught up a magazine entitled *The Slot Machine,* rolled it up and winking at Sargent practically pushed him out of the office.

He hurried down the aisle between the cubicles, whispered something to Mildred O'Kelly and went out.

Sargent returned to his own office, started to enter, then shrugging, stepped back and continued in the direction of Mildred's desk to the last cubicle.

A handsome curly-haired man in his late twenties held up the palm of his hand. "Don't tell me," he said, in a dramatic voice. "You're the new editor. I have ears to hear. I've heard. Your name is Sargent. I, sir, am Andrew Lawrence, editor of—guess what? *Creep & Crawl!* No less, the one and only magazine dedicated to the cockroach!"

"For God's sake!" gasped Sargent. "Is everybody crazy around here?"

"You doubt my word?" cried Andrew Lawrence. "Look!" He scooped up a trade journal and thrust it at Sargent. *"Creep & Crawl,* the Insecticide Magazine! Yeah, goes to insecticide eliminators. You don't talk about them, but they're there—everywhere! And every town in this country has its insect exterminator. This sheet goes to him. It's the second most profitable one in the house."

"What's the first?"

"The Slot Machine. That carries this whole shebang. Grosvenor Black runs it, in the odd moments he isn't doping the ponies. Chap who just ran out to place a bet."

"He said he was calling on an advertiser."

"Naturally. You, too, will learn. Come the Yanks to play our White Sox or there's a good bill down at McVickers—you stick a copy of your book in your pocket and call on an advertiser. Which reminds me, I think I'll go call on an advertiser. See you, tomorrow, Sargent."

Sargent returned to his office and seated himself with the copy of *Turkey*

Talk. He turned to the editorial page, started to read and leaned forward as his interest was caught.

The editorial was nothing more, nor less, than a bitter harangue directed at the publisher of a rival turkey publication, called *Turkey Tracks.* The editorial practically called the rival a crook and wound up by intimating that the magazine was using a subscription list stolen from *Turkey Talk. Business Journals, Inc.,* in fact, was offering substantial rewards to subscribers who could furnish damaging evidence to that effect. What sort of evidence was wanted was not stated, nor was the amount of the sizable reward.

He was still reading when Mildred O'Kelly came to the door of his office. "Look, Frankie," she said, amiably, "Ben wants to see you."

Sargent closed the copy of *Turkey Talk* but took it with him as he adjourned to Chapman's private office. He wondered if he was being fired.

Chapman waved the shears at him. "Close the door, I want to have a talk with you. Sligo's been squawking. I want to tell you about him because I can't trust anyone around here. They all hate my guts. If anything happens to me, Sligo's the man the police want. He's made threats against me and he's quite capable of carrying them out. I've been having him shadowed by a detective agency and they've reported that he consorts with gangsters and such ilk. Remember that, Corporal."

"Sargent!" Sargent said. "But look, Mr. Chapman, I've just started to work here. Wouldn't it be better—?"

"No! You haven't had time yet to take sides. I'm an excellent judge of character. Before I became a trade journal publisher I was a newspaper man. A damn good one if I do say so. I earned fifty dollars a week. People used to point me out on the street. Then I got the *Sugar Beet Review* and made it the classiest little trade journal in the industry. That reminds me, you ought to put out a special Colorado issue of *Turkey Talk.* They raise a lot of turkeys down there. Our White Holland issue was a good one.

"Steer clear of Lew Thayer. He's a drunkard. I'm thinking of firing him. Here are a bunch of subscription letters that have come in since I fired Pelkey. I've taken the money that came with them. Better get the names entered. You go to press tomorrow with the June issue. Get your galleys from Mutter before you leave tonight. I've been thinking we ought to make a drive for commission house advertising. No reason why those fellows shouldn't advertise in *Turkey Talk.* They've got the money and we've got the turkeys. Hanson Hill's a dirty crook, but he stands in with that crowd. That Minnesota turkey pool of his is nothing but a fraud. I'll send him to jail before I get through."

"Hanson Hill owns *Turkey Tracks,* doesn't he?" Sargent managed to get in edgewise. "I was just reading—"

"He used to work for me. Made him a mighty fine proposition and he double-crossed me. Started a competitive sheet. Haley did that on *Soap Digest* and I made him pretty sick before he quit. Did the same thing to Sligo. Why I ever took that man into this business I don't know. I'm going to fire him one of these days."

"Sligo?" Sargent asked.

"Haley. I fired him. Caught him dipping his fingers into the petty cash. Forget what I said about Sligo. Helped me out of a spot one time. Grand fellow, Sligo. Smartest business manager in the trade journal field. Published *Candy Columns* and made a good thing of it. Have you pasted up your dummy yet for the June

issue? You go to press tomorrow. Gums up the whole shop if you throw them off schedule. Get busy. If there's one thing I don't like it's an editor who sits around twiddling his thumbs. Here, enter these subscriptions—"

Sargent took a double handful of envelopes, all of which had been slit open and fled to his cubicle.

"Godalmighty," he said, under his breath, "what a man! What a business. . . . Hello!"

During his absence someone had deposited a bundle of galley proofs on his desk. One set was on white paper and another on pink, duplicates of the whites. Sargent looked at them curiously.

"Pasting up a dummy" had a familiar ring. He'd heard the term before, or read about it somewhere and knew vaguely that it had to do with getting a magazine ready for the printer, but exactly what the work entailed was beyond him.

He took the proofs into Jim Robertson's office. "Look," he said, "I'm green as grass about this business. What do I do with these?"

"You read the whites and make your corrections on them. The pinks you use to make up your dummy."

"Yeah, but just what is a dummy?"

"Don't you know?"

"I was never inside an editorial office in my life before today," Sargent confessed, grinning ruefully. Then he added, "And I'm wondering if I'm going to last it out. My head's been in a whirl ever since I came in here."

"Frank," said Robertson. "Look, it's quarter to five. Shove all that stuff in a drawer and we'll call it a day. I'll give you a few pointers about this racket over a bowl of soup if you're not in a hurry."

"Oh, I haven't got a thing to do. And I'd certainly appreciate anything you can tell me. Frankly, I don't know whether I'm coming or going and I can't seem to understand much of what Mr. Chapman tells me—except that he once published a trade paper called *Sugar Beet Review—*"

Robertson chuckled. "You'll get sick of that *Sugar Beet Review.* Come on, let's go!"

As they walked down the center aisle toward the door, Sligo came out of his office and made a show of looking at his watch, to indicate that he knew they were beating the gun by a few minutes.

Outside the building, Robertson said to Sargent, "I didn't know Ben had an ad in the paper this week. When did he interview you?"

"Just a little while ago, when I came up to the office."

"The first time? Funny no one else answered the ad."

"I didn't answer an ad."

"Then how'd you happen to get the job?"

Sargent laughed. "I came up to interview Chapman. You see, I work for the Trotter Institute of Public Opinion. The Trotter Poll, you know. I didn't know Chapman from Adam. I started to ask him the usual stuff and he went into a monologue and wound up by hiring me. It's the craziest thing ever happened to me in all my life."

Robertson nodded. "Stick around awhile."

"You don't seem surprised. Does Chapman always hire his help that way?"

"No, he usually runs ads in the *Sunday Tribune.* You'll find out about that later. Where do you live?"

"In a hotel on North Avenue, near Halsted."

"That's not so far from where I hang out. I've got a hole on Dearborn, near Division. This joint look all right to eat?"

"Fine."

THEY entered a café and seated themselves in a booth. "I don't know about you," Robertson said, "but I always have a drink the first thing after I leave the office."

"That's okay by me. I'll have a martini."

When the waiter brought the drinks Robertson downed his in two gulps and promptly ordered another. Sargent contented himself with taking a sip of his martini.

"Are all publishing offices as, uh, hectic as *Business Journals?*"

Robertson lit a cigarette and studied Sargent cautiously for a moment. "I just remembered I've got a date later on. Now, just what can I tell you about the details of making up a magazine?"

"The dummy. I don't know a thing about pasting it up."

"Simple. Your copy's already been set in type. Pelkey took care of that before he was—before he left. So you just trim the margins from your pink galleys and paste up the magazine the way you'd like to have it.

"First your ads, of course, although there aren't many on *Turkey Talk.* Then your reading matter. Use an old copy as a model. First, though, you ought to read the white galleys so that the shop can make any corrections that are necessary."

"Yes, but it seems to me I've heard that proofreaders have special marks they use."

Robertson looked thoughtfully at Sargent, then shook his head. "Get yourself a proofreader's chart tonight. Memorize the marks and you'll get by. It's not so hard. Here—stop at the public library on your way home and get this book." He scribbled on a slip of paper: *Journalism as a Career,* by J. C. Weisinger. "The book stinks, but it's got some fundamentals in it that might help."

"Thanks, Robertson. I appreciate your help. How long have you been with *Business Journals?*"

"Quite a while. Eight months."

"Only eight months? Why, I've been with the Trotter Poll longer than that."

"I'm the second oldest man at *Business Journals,*" Robertson said.

"What about Pelkey?"

"What about him?"

"Why, I don't know. Everybody mentions him, but nobody really says anything about him."

"Sargent," said Robertson, "I've worked on newspapers all over the country. I'm what they used to call a boomer reporter. But I got fed up with the life, so I thought I'd get into something stable—like trade journals. I do my work—and mind my own business. Catch on?"

Sargent reddened. "Yeah, sure. But I'm all at sevens and eights. I'm wondering whether I didn't make a mistake taking this job."

FRANK SARGENT was the first one down at the offices of *Business Journals, Incorporated,* in the morning. He arrived at ten minutes to nine and found the door locked. He waited in the hall until nine-fifteen, when Jim Robertson arrived, simultaneously with Mildred O'Kelly.

"Where's the worm?" Mildred asked him cheerfully. "Or, didn't you catch one?"

"I didn't. What time does the staff generally get to work?"

"Well," said Robertson, grinning, "Chapman gets in at ten forty-five. On the dot, every morning. Sligo usually doesn't get down until noon, so the rest of us get in any time between nine-fifteen and ten forty-five."

"I've got to be here early to cover up for the editors," Mildred explained. "Our beloved boss has a habit of calling up before he comes down. Then I tell him that Editor So-and-so is up in the composing room. Actually, that means he's down at Joe's Lunch Room or is still at home, pounding his ear, after a bad night."

"Mildred's the office pet," Robertson chuckled. "Some pet, too."

"Some day I'll take you up on that, Jim Robertson," Mildred said, pointedly. "And then what'll that dizzy blonde of yours do for a boy friend?"

"That wasn't a blonde, it was—hi, Grosvenor, what's good for today?"

Grosvenor Black came into the office. He

was all dressed up in a nice green suit with a reddish stripe and had a few rings, cuff links and necktie pins with stones, which if genuine would have assayed Black at nearly a half million. He dry-washed his hands.

"Did you see what Weeping Lady paid yesterday at Pimlico? Fourteen-forty. Not bad, not bad, at all."

"How much did you have on her, Grosvenor?"

"Nothing. I was on Brass Gorilla in the same race. But I was going to put it on Weeping Lady, damned if I wasn't, except that I figured she was carrying too much weight. She was, too. Surprised she came in. How do you like the job, Sargent?"

"Just fine, Black, just fine."

"Call me Grosvenor. The name's spelled with an 'S' but it's silent like the 'Q' in billiards. Ha-ha. Get it?"

Black whipped a *Racing Form* out of his pocket and went into his cubicle. Robertson winked. "Great guy, Black. Top of the morning to you, Mr. Lawrence."

"Heigh-ho, Robertson! And Mr. Sargent, I believe. Milly, my sweet, you're simply ravishing this morning." Andrew Lawrence threw his arms about Mildred O'Kelly and hugged her, while she struggled in his embrace. She finally broke his hold by slapping his face smartly. Lawrence took it good naturedly.

"Great gang, eh, Sargent? Characters, everyone of us, from Ben O. right down the line. I hear you're the guy who picked Willkie to beat Roosevelt."

"The Trotter Poll picked him," grinned Sargent. "I only worked for them."

"Like the publishing business better?"

"It's more exciting—so far!"

"Oh!" cried Mildred O'Kelly.

Startled, Sargent's eyes went to the door. Ben O. Chapman was coming in. His fishy eyes darted from one to the other of his editors.

"Here, here," he exclaimed peevishly, "what's this, a convention? Break it up. I don't pay you to stand around gassing all day. Robertson, did you get that Casey ad? No, of course not. Lawrence, what about that Consolidated Cockroach account? And you, Sargent, I suppose your dummy is all pasted up since you have time to stand around doing nothing?"

"No, sir, I was just starting on it."

"Starting? You've had all morning. What've you been doing?"

Chapman did not wait for an answer, but continued on to his office, entering and closing the door behind him.

The various trade paper editors dispersed to their private offices.

Sargent pulled open the several drawers of his ancient desk and found paste pot and brush and a pair of shears with one blade broken off. He trimmed the margins of the pink proofs and discovered that one of the articles for his magazine was entitled: *"Baccillary White Diarrhea in Poults"* and another, *"Coccidiosis, Its Cause and Prevention."*

NEITHER titles meant a thing to him. He started to read the one on diarrhea and was suddenly reminded that he was supposed to read the white proofs the first thing this morning.

Slyly, he drew a sheet of paper from his pocket. He had copied it from the book he had secured at the library the evening before. It contained the proofreaders' symbols.

He opened the center drawer a few inches, pushed back his chair so he could look into the drawer and still reach his desk, then putting the sheet containing the marks in the drawer, he began reading proofs.

A half hour went by and then Ben O. Chapman came out of his office and began calling for Sligo. "Where the devil is that man? He's never around here when he's needed."

Sargent heard a door open, then silence for an instant before Ben O. Chapman bleated. "He's dead, he's dead. He's been murdered. Sligo's dead!"

Sargent dropped the white proofs and sprang out of his office, almost colliding with Andrew Lawrence coming out of his own cubby hole. They were immediately joined by Black and Robertson and converged upon Ben Chapman in a solid phalanx.

Chapman was blocking the door of Sligo's office. Sargent, peering over his shoulder, gave a sudden shudder.

Yes, Sligo was dead. There was no doubt of that. He was lying on his back on the floor of his little office. The handles of a pair of shears stood up from his chest.

Sargent retreated softly and poked his head into Ben O. Chapman's office. Chapman, whirling at the moment, saw his act. "Yes!" he howled, "they're my shears. I recognize them, but I—I didn't do it. I wouldn't harm a hair of poor Sligo's head. He was the best friend a man ever had, the finest business partner. Poor Danny!"

Behind the group, at her desk, Mildred O'Kelly screamed and toppled from her chair to the floor in a dead faint.

"Thayer!" Chapman suddenly cried. "Where's Lew Thayer? He did this. He never liked Sligo. They quarreled only last week."

Andrew Lawrence stabbed his forefinger dramatically at his employer. "You, sir, quarreled with Sligo only yesterday."

"I didn't. I had a few words with him, yes, but I didn't quarrel with him. I always got along with Sligo. Why, he was the vice-president of this firm!"

Sargent walked back through the office to where Mildred O'Kelly lay on the floor. He stooped over her, just as her eyes began to flutter.

"Oh!" she gasped. "Mr. Sligo—"

Jim Robertson came up and putting his arm under Mildred's shoulders raised her to a sitting position. Mildred smiled gratefully at him. Sargent, in the meantime, experimented with the switchboard and got the operator.

"Police Department," he said.

"No!" cried Ben O. Chapman. "You can't call the police. I don't like them. They're nothing but hoodlums and grafters."

Sargent covered the mouthpiece with his hand. "A man has been murdered; how do you expect to keep the police away?"

Chapman moaned. "I suppose so. Oh . . . my nerves! Why this should happen to me, I don't know—"

"Police Department," said a voice in Sargent's ear.

"You'd better send someone down to the offices of *Business Journals, Incorporated,* in the Dockery Building. A man seems to have been murdered!"

AFTER a brief explanation Sargent put down the telephone and regarded the office, rather the aisle between the cubicles of which he had a clear view. Beside him Mildred was now propped in a chair, by Jim Robertson. Just beyond, leaning casually against his office, was Andrew Lawrence. Still farther along, Grosvenor Black, looking more pop-eyed than ever, was licking his lips with a bright red tongue.

Ben O. Chapman was pacing up and down, his hands clasped behind his back.

"Who did this to poor Danny?" he moaned. "He never harmed a soul in his life."

At this juncture, a man came into the office. He was a mousy, insignificant looking individual of indeterminate age. He coughed loudly to call attention to himself.

"Mr. Chapman, could I see you for a moment?"

Chapman exclaimed in consternation when he saw the little man. "No! Please go way. Call me later in the day. I can't see you now. Something terrible has happened."

"Very well, Mr. Chapman," said the little man. "I'll telephone you this afternoon."

He didn't get to leave the office, however, for at that moment there was the

scuffling of many feet outside the door and the police invaded the place.

THERE were many of them, in uniform as well as in plainclothes. Some of the latter may have been men from the medical examiner's office, or perhaps even newspaper men. Sargent didn't know. There was tremendous confusion in the office for a long time.

He sought refuge in his little cubicle and began reading proofs.

Men poked their heads in and out of his office, barked questions at him and sometimes waited for answers. More often they didn't.

Flashlight bulbs popped, voices chattered excitedly, whispered, cajoled and threatened. A couple of white uniformed men carried a long basket past Sargent's office. A lot of the men left about that time.

A quiet man of thirty-five or so, wearing a neat double-breasted suit, came into Sargent's office. "I'm Lieutenant Fanning," he said. "D'you mind answering a few questions? Have to talk to everyone, you know." He smiled apologetically.

"All right," said Sargent, "what do you want to know?"

"Your name first."

"Frank Sargent."

"You're an editor here? How long have you been with the firm?"

"Since yesterday afternoon."

"That all? How'd you happen to get the job?"

"I don't know."

"What do you mean, you don't know?"

"For the past year I've been a fieldworker for the Trotter Institute of Public Opinion. In the course of that work, I came here to interview Mr. Ben O. Chapman. It turned out that he interviewed me—and I got this job."

"Mm, rather unusual, isn't it? But tell me, how'd you happen to call on Ben O. Chapman? By accident?"

"Well, not exactly. My job yesterday was to get three housewives and then three business men in the upper medium brackets. I figured that I ought to get a storekeeper, a stockbroker and a publisher."

"All right, now what do you know about Sligo?"

"I spoke less than a dozen words to him. He stuck his head through that door yesterday afternoon and asked if I was a new man and I said yes."

"That's only one word; you said a dozen."

"Well, I didn't say yes exactly like that. Sligo asked something about if I'd had experience and I replied that Mr. Chapman hadn't thought that necessary."

"And you didn't know Chapman before he employed you yesterday?"

"That's right."

Lieutenant Fanning nodded thoughtfully. "All right, Sargent, that'll be all for now. I may want to talk to you again later."

SARGENT read some more proofs and after awhile Jim Robertson stuck his head into the office. "It's twelve o'clock. Feel like putting on the feed bag?"

"Yeah, sure, but do you suppose—?"

"I asked. It's okay."

Sargent put on his hat and he and Robertson left the office. A stocky man in a derby picked them up just outside the door and followed them to Joe's Lunch Room on the corner, but made no attempt to talk to them.

They found a small table and the man with the derby seated himself at the counter.

"It's okay," Robertson said, "but the lieutenant-copper put a shadow on us. Just in case. Well, what do you think?"

"About Sligo?"

"Everything. Ben O. Chapman, Sligo, the publishing business."

Sargent smiled wryly. "Things happen, don't they?"

"Don't they! Ben tell you anything about Sligo yesterday?"

"Would he be apt to tell a new man?" Sargent asked, cautiously.

"Ben would stop a stranger on the street and tell him his life history. He's told me about the *Sugar Beet Review* a thousand times. Sligo, too. Ben hated his guts."

"They didn't see eye to eye on the business, I suppose?"

"Or anything. Ernie Pelkey told me—" Robertson frowned and broke off, then sighed wearily. "Look, Sargent, I *think* you're okay. But if I spill my nut and you blab to Chapman my goose is cooked."

"All right," said Sargent, "I'll come clean. My coming up to the office yesterday wasn't exactly an accident. But I'd met Ernest Pelkey—"

"Where?"

"At his home in River Forest. Oh, I went *there* by accident. Mrs. Pelkey answered the door and tried to shoosh me away quietly and then Pelkey came out. I never saw a man in such a state of nerves."

Robertson screwed up his mouth. "Pelkey mentioned Chapman?"

"Yes. I happened to ask him his vocation and he began to curse Chapman up and down."

"I saw Ernie two days ago. He's in a bad way. I told you, didn't I, that Ernie worked for Chapman two years? Longer than anyone ever worked for him. They come and go at Chapman's."

"That bad?"

Robertson grinned crookedly. "Oh, you might last a long time. Sligo was a trouble-

maker. With him out of the way—mmm, maybe we'd better not talk about that."

"Because it was Chapman's scissors that were found stuck in Sligo?"

"That little fellow who came in just before the cops—he's a private detective, you know. Works for the Decker Agency. Fanning gave him the once-over in Chapman's office. The panels are kinda thin and my office is right next door, you know. It seems Chapman had hired this Wilting—that's the detective—to shadow Sligo. Chapman claimed that Sligo had hired someone to kill him. What do you think of that?"

Sargent whistled. "He hinted at that to me. Why, I don't know. But he said if anything happened to him Sligo was the man to tell the police about."

"So if Ben Chapman had been killed, Sligo would have been the murderer. But it's Sligo who's been killed."

"Meaning?"

"I'm not a policeman. I'm a trade paper editor."

"So am I—for the nonce." Sargent frowned. "Do you suppose the business will fold up now?"

"Hardly. Ben O. is *Business Journals, Incorporated.* Sligo was excess baggage. He wasn't even a brake on Ben. Complained about everything, yes, but Ben just went ahead and did what he wanted."

"Which brings you down to the question I've wanted to ask you ever since yesterday. Barring yourself . . . is everyone at the office insane?"

Robertson laughed so suddenly particles of food flew from his mouth. "It *is* the whackiest crowd you ever saw, isn't it?"

They had finished their meal by now and the waiter brought their checks. Robertson picked up his own and left a nickel tip.

Sargent followed his example.

They paid their checks at the door and started back to the Dockery Building. Their shadow was fifty feet behind them.

Sargent had scarcely stepped into his office than a white-haired, wild-looking man in shirt sleeves with printer's ink

smeared all over his hands, arms and face, popped in.

"You're the new editor of *Turkey Talk?*" he cried. "Well, where the hell are your proofs and your dummy? How the hell can we go to press when the editorial department keeps us waiting?"

SARGENT looked coldly at the printer. "You're Mutter, I suppose? Well, you sure don't mumble. You'll get your damn proofs when I get good and ready to give them to you."

"What?" howled Mutter, the printing foreman. "I'll see Ben Chapman about this. He'll fire you, that's what he'll do. He knows that a printer's time is worth money."

"So's mine!"

"How much?" sneered Mutter. "Twenty-two fifty a week? *We're* union."

Sargent picked up the white galleys and thrust them at the foreman. "Here, take them and get to hell out. You'll have your dummy in a couple of hours."

"In *one* hour. I could paste it up myself in ten minutes, the crap you use." With that last taunt, Mutter took his departure.

Savagely, Sargent began to paste up his dummy. Heedless of how the articles went into the magazine, he snipped chunks off the pink galleys and pasted them to the pages of an old copy of *Turkey Talk.*

When Sargent reached his hotel that evening, the problems of *Business Journals* were dismissed from his mind by a special delivery airmail letter from the Trotter Institute of Public Opinion. It was signed by Leonard Trotter himself and read:

"Dear Sargent:

"Apparently you're under the impression that we're issuing annual reports of public opinion, since I haven't received any cards from you this week. We're still doing business in the *old* way and unless I get your quota by Friday, there'll be a new man covering your territory.

"Sincerely yours,
"Leonard Trotter."

Sargent groaned. He was exhausted mentally and physically, but the way things were with his new job he thought it best to keep his part-time job awhile longer.

He grabbed a quick dinner at a restaurant on North Avenue and Halsted and then spent four hours making "poll" calls. He returned to his hotel room utterly exhausted, at eleven-thirty, then had to spend another hour tabulating his reports and getting them ready to mail to the offices of the Trotter Institute.

THINGS were quiet at the office the next morning but when Sargent and Jim Robertson went to Joe's Lunch Room, Sargent exclaimed in chagrin.

"The cop, Jim!"

Robertson swiveled his head and located the detective who had shadowed them the day before. "Cripes, I'd forgotten all about Sligo. Hell, he must have been following one of us ever since yesterday. Which of us?"

"Not me," said Sargent. "Lieutenant Fanning practically gave me a clean bill yesterday."

"Well, me too. Or he lied like hell! Damn! I wonder if he followed me last night."

"If he followed *me* last night, he got bunions for his trouble. I was collecting statistics for good old Leonard Trotter."

"I went to bed early," said Robertson. But his forehead remained creased in a frown.

They returned to the offices of *Business Journals, Incorporated,* the detective still following them. As they entered the office, Mildred O'Kelly gave them a quick signal of caution. Sargent, looking into the open door of Sligo's office, saw a huddle of people inside; Lieutenant Fanning, Ben O. Chapman, two strange men and one

woman, a buxom, stern-faced woman of about forty. She looked like a cartoonist's version of a mother-in-law.

"This is an outrage, Mrs. Sligo," Ben Chapman was whining. "Danny and I were partners for years."

"I know all about that," snapped Mrs. Sligo. "You were partners like a cat and a mouse are partners. If you must have the plain truth, Ben Chapman, I don't trust you.

"That's why I've brought my attorney and an accountant here with me. Now, take your choice, will you let the accountant go over the books or must Mr. Koppis get out a court order?"

"I've already got the order drawn up," said Mr. Koppis, a swarthy little man with a Jerry Colonna mustache. "All I got to do is take it down to Judge Witnouer for him to sign."

"It's none of my business, Mr. Chapman," said Lieutenant Fanning, "but they are right; they can do it. Why don't you let them go over the books? After all, you've nothing to fear—have you?"

"No, no, of course not," Ben Chapman said, hastily. "It's just that I don't like the idea; the widow of my poor, dear friend mistrusting — ah, very well, go ahead!"

He turned and slammed back to his office. Fanning, catching the eye of Sargent who was standing carelessly in the door of his own office, winked and came over.

"Well, how do you like your new job so far?"

"Fine. And you?"

"Everything's under control."

"I suppose you expect to make an arrest at any moment?"

"Uh-huh. I talked to a couple of former employees of Chapman's this morning. Hanson Hill who quit here and started a magazine of his own. Know him?"

"Only by name."

"That's right, you wouldn't. He worked here a couple of years ago. Mmm, I also talked to Hill's successor—your predecessor; fellow named Pelkey."

"Yes?" said Sargent almost holding his breath.

"Poor chap's in a bad way, seems to be suffering from a bad case of nerves. Ever meet Pelkey?"

"Of course I did," snapped Sargent. "You're trying to lead me into a trap."

Fanning grinned ruefully. "You told me yesterday you came to see Ben Chapman by accident. Picked his name out of a phone book, or something."

"Or something! As a matter of fact, I happened to call on Pelkey on behalf of the Trotter Poll. I was imbued with a morbid curiosity to see the man who could do to another what had apparently been done to Pelkey, so since I had to interview a business man, anyway, I thought—"

"Sure, I understand." Fanning's voice was agreeable and soothing. "So it was practically accidental that you came here. Just like it was practically accidental that you called on Pelkey."

"Eh? That *was* an accident. I never saw or heard of Ernest Pelkey before I rang the door of his home."

"By the way, who answered? Pelkey or his pretty wife?"

"His wife. Why?"

"No reason. Just curious. Like you. She's a looker, isn't she?"

"I see a lot of good looking women in my work," Sargent retorted.

"Bet you do. Ha-ha. Even here, eh?" Fanning winked and stepped out of Sargent's office.

Sargent sat for a few moments, frowning at a stack of mail someone had placed on his desk during his absence.

The mail was still in the original envelopes, but each had been slit open. On some of the envelopes were penciled notations, "$1 cash," or "$1 ck." These were subscription orders. All mail at *Business Journals,* it seemed, went through Ben Chapman's hands first and he extracted the remittances.

Sargent got up with the intention of asking Jim Robertson how to enter subscriptions, but saw Fanning in *The Skating Rink* editor's office, so stepped across the hall to the office of Andrew Lawrence.

LAWRENCE took him to the safe, near Mildred O'Kelly's desk and rummaging about in it, produced a ledger on which was stamped, in gold letters: *The Billiard Parlor.*

"This is your book on *Turkey Talk.* There're a few pages missing from the front, that used to be for *The Billiard Parlor,* one of Ben's flops. He started the magazine, then found out owners of poolrooms couldn't read— Now, here's what you do; you write down the name of the person or firm who sent the money, here, for what purpose and here, the amount. Your subscriptions you type out on a sheet of paper and give once a month to Mutter in the shop who will set up the names in type. This is bookkeeping in its simplest form, which is the only kind we use around here."

Sargent carried the ledger to his office and began making his entries.

He entered but three subscriptions when Ben O. Chapman's voice called: "Sargent, come in here, please!"

Sargent went to Chapman's private office, wondering as he did every time he was summoned, if he was being fired.

Chapman was hunched down in his swivel chair, toying with an 18-inch pica ruler. "I've been watching you, Sargent. You're doing good work and one of these days you may become as good an editor as Grosvenor Black. I'm a good judge of character. Even my enemies concede that. I'm going to raise your salary, Sargent."

Sargent inhaled sharply. "Why— thanks!"

"Not now, though," Chapman continued. "In a little while. Remind me of it in a few weeks. I want you to do a little special work for me. You're new here. All the others stick together and I can't trust them. I want you to do a little investigating for me. Talk to the fellows. Ask them what they thought about Sligo —and me, too."

"You mean," said Sargent, bluntly, "you want me to be the office spy and stool pigeon?"

"No, no, not at all. Wouldn't think of such a thing. It's just that I sense an undercurrent around here. Things going on. Sligo's death has upset me. I'm throwing a little party tonight at my apartment. Come up about eight. Harcross Apartments on Clark, near Fullerton."

THE Harcross Apartments turned out to be a four-story, somewhat grimy walk-up on Clark Street. From the mail-box tags Sargent learned that Ben O. Chapman's apartment was on the third floor. He had no difficulty finding it once he reached the third floor; the din could only come from Chapman's party. He rang the doorbell and waited for a full minute, then rang again. Still receiving no answer he opened the door and became a member of the party.

The main part of it was in Chapman's living room, lit up ridiculously with low-watt electric light bulbs concealed in paper Japanese lanterns.

Sargent would have guessed from the noise, that there were at least fifty people at the party, but actually there were only a dozen or so. It was a loud dozen, however.

Two or three men and that many girls were crowded around a player piano singing the accompaniment to *Margie.* Nearby a man and a girl were somehow seated on a single morris chair, necking.

Ben O. Chapman, himself, was sitting cross-legged on the floor, haranguing three or four guests who were crowded around him in various postures.

He was saying, loudly, "There I was, one of the biggest men in the city, making fifty dollars a week. That may not sound like much to you, but you must remember

that this was twenty years ago. People used to point me out on the street— Hello, Sargent, get yourself some ginger ale in the kitchen. I told you to bring a bottle of liquor, didn't I? So then I got wind of the *Sugar Beet Review,* a rundown magazine that no one thought much of. I took it over and made it the best trade journal in the country and—"

Sargent found the kitchen and in it a blonde wrestling with an uncouth, bald-headed man, who was drooling at the mouth. The blonde was holding her own, but probably needed a rest for she seemed glad to see Sargent.

"Why, darling!" she cried. "I had *no* idea you were coming here. You remember *me*—Eileen? I want you to meet Eli Crombie, a very dear friend."

Mr. Crombie glowered at Sargent, because he had interrupted the wrestling match, but stuck out a fat hand. "H'arya. Any friend of Eileen's is a friend of mine."

"Hello, Eli," Sargent said, shortly. "Ben told me I'd find a drink out here."

"Sure, help yourself," said Eli Crombie, generously. "I brung a couple of quarts of rye. Help yourself."

Sargent found a bottle that someone besides Crombie and Eileen had been helping themselves from and poured out about an inch into a glass.

Another party guest kicked open the kitchen door. "Ben says to come out, he's going to put on a show."

In the living room the player piano was silent and the guests were all squatted on the floor, facing the front of the room.

A Hottentot, wearing a business suit, popped out of a bedroom door. He was a Hottentot from the neck up, with a ferocious black face and a ring in the nose and an enormous fuzzy head of kinky hair.

From the neck down, the Hottentot was Ben O. Chapman.

All the girls squealed.

"Yi-yi-yi!" yipped Ben O. Chapman, the president of *Business Journals, Incorporated.* "Scared you, didn't I? I picked this up in a little shop down in New Orleans when I was publishing the *Sugar Beet Review.* A Dutch sailor brought it there, the man told me. Claimed it came direct from Africa. Now, wait a minute and I'll really show you something." Chapman ducked back into the bedroom.

"Is he nuts?" asked Eli Crombie, breathing heavily down Sargent's neck.

"No," said Sargent. "Not nuts, just a little squirrely."

Ben Chapman's voice came from the bedroom. "Pull yourselves together, now; you're going to be scared, but it's really me, remember."

He came out wearing a life mask of Boris Karloff disguised as the Frankenstein monster.

To further the illusion he had also donned an old-fashioned coat with sleeves and padded shoulders. He even assayed a loose-limbed gait, a la Karloff.

"Woo, woo, woo!" Ben O. bellowed.

"Gee!" cried a voice in the rear of the room. "I'm cockeyed drunk!"

Sargent, whirling, saw red-headed Lew Thayer in the open doorway. Thayer's hair was disheveled, his face had a three days' growth of red beard and his clothes were soiled and creased.

" 'S'cuse me, folks," Thayer said, bowing drunkenly. "I musta got the wrong door. Maybe the wrong building."

"Shut the door, Thayer!" snapped Ben O. Chapman through his Frankenstein mask.

Thayer's head came up like that of a colored man walking through a cemetery at midnight and having a skeleton pop up in front of him.

"Who's that talkin' to me?" he yelled. "Ya wanna make something of it? Put up your dukes! I ain't 'fraida no-one, no matter what you look like, see!"

Chapman came forward. "Thayer, you drunken sot, I've taken enough from you. You're fired, understand? You're fired. Now, go home and—"

Smack!

That was Lew Thayer's fist landing in the middle of the Karloff makeup. Ben O. Chapman sat down violently on the floor and a couple of the girls screamed.

Sargent stepped behind Thayer and locked him in a bear hug. "Cut it out, Lew. That was Chapman you hit."

"Chapman, where's Chapman?" cried Thayer.

Ben O. was picking himself up from the floor. He had stripped the mask from his face and was holding his nose with a hand.

"Excuse me," said a voice at the door, "am I intruding?"

Lieutenant Fanning smiled pleasantly. Ben O. Chapman's face darkened in anger.

"What right have you to invade the privacy of my home, Officer?" he demanded.

"The people downstairs are complaining about the noise up here," Lieutenant Fanning grinned.

"They telephoned the police department? And *you* came. I thought you were a Homicide detective?"

Lieutenant Fanning scratched his head, while his eyes twinkled. "I heard something I thought might interest you. We got a rather strange call at Headquarters. About a fellow disappearing. His name is Pelkey, Ernest Pel—"

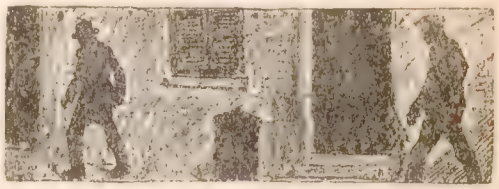
"Ohmigawd!" groaned Chapman clapping both hands to his head. "Where is he?"

"Pelkey? I don't know. That's what I was telling you. He disappeared. His wife is rather worried about him, because it seems Pelkey has been ill."

"He's crazy! And he'll kill me. He threatened he'd do it and he will. Lieutenant, you've got to find Pelkey and put him under lock and key. I tell you the man is dangerous. He's a homicidal maniac!"

Fanning stared at Chapman in astonishment, whether pretended or real, Sargent could not determine. "But his wife said he was suffering merely from a slight nervous disorder."

"That's what *she* calls it. Pelkey is a victim of *dementia praecox*. He's stark, raving mad and he'll kill me."



"Why should he have such a down on you, Mr. Chapman?"

"I don't know. He worked for me two years. Naturally, when he became a victim of this disease I couldn't keep him on at the office, so he blames me— Yes, that's it. He's down on me, because I had to let him go."

"I see. Well, look, Mr. Chapman, I don't want to spoil your party here. There's just one thing more I'd like to ask you this evening. That's regarding the missing advertising salesman—have you any idea where I might locate him?"

Frank Sargent tried to catch Chapman's eye, but it was too much to expect. Chapman whirled and pointed at Lew Thayer. In the ensuing commotion, Sargent deserted Ben Chapman's party.

He'd had enough party for one evening. He'd made up his mind about one thing, though; there would never be a dull moment where Ben O. Chapman was.

He walked on Clark to Halsted and caught a southbound street car, which deposited him in a few minutes on North Avenue, just a block from the Ajax Hotel.

THE Ajax was a fourth-rate rooming house, consisting of two floors of rooms over a restaurant. Sargent climbed a long flight of stairs to the second floor and started down a narrow, dimly lit corridor to his room, the last one on the left-hand side.

His door, oddly, was unlocked, which

annoyed Sargent. It wasn't safe to leave your door unlocked at the Ajax if you had anything of value. He pushed open the door and flicked the light switch just inside. Then he stepped in.

Ernest Pelkey got up from the bed.

"You're Frank Sargent," he said.

A shudder ran through Sargent. He kept his hand on the doorknob and could scarcely restrain an impulse to leap backward and take to his heels.

He said, "That's right. How'd you get in my room?"

"With a skeleton key. I used to know a locksmith. I'm Ernest Pelkey. You're the Trotter Poll man. I never forget a face. You pumped my wife and heard I'd lost my job, so you hustled right down and applied for the job. Pretty clever of you, Sargent."

"Maybe so, Pelkey, but you just made two wrong statements. I *didn't* pump your wife. I didn't get to ask her anything, before you came to the door. I didn't even learn your name from her. *You* came out with the name of *Chapman*. Someone up the street gave me your name."

"But you *did* apply for my job?"

"No. I called on Chapman mostly through idle curiosity. I have been and still am—during spare time—a Trotter field man. If you know anything of the Trotter Poll you know that we try to get a cross-section of public opinion. To save time that would have gone into investigating another business man I called on Chapman. He started talking and before I knew what he was even talking about he had hired me. *You* know Ben O. Chapman, if anyone does."

Ernest Pelkey's eyes began to glow. "Yes, I know Chapman, the dirty swine. I worked for him for two years. They were two years of hell. You couldn't possibly guess what kind of dog he is. He's the lowest creature that ever walked this earth."

"But a job's a job," said Sargent.

"No job's worth what you'll go through under Chapman. He'll drive you crazy, like—" Pelkey stopped and his face twitched horribly. "He'll drive you crazy," he repeated. *"He'll drive you crazy!"* Pelkey's voice rose to a shriek and he began clenching and unclenching his fists.

Sargent got up from the cane rocking chair. Pelkey, guessing his intention, stepped forward and blocked the door. "No, you don't, Sargent. You're not going to call them. I'm as sane as anyone. Only Chapman, the dirty—" A sob was torn from his throat and he suddenly hurled himself upon Sargent.

Sargent tried to dodge and stumbled against the cane chair. Pelkey's hands closed about his windpipe and choked the breath out of it. Sargent tried to tear Pelkey's hands away, but couldn't. A roaring began to fill his ears.

Savagely, he smashed Pelkey in the stomach with his fist. The hands loosened about his throat, air rushed into his lungs and he drove his fist into Pelkey's stomach once more.

Pelkey crashed to the floor on his back. He lay there for an instant staring up at Sargent with a dazed expression. Then he began to get up slowly.

Sargent retreated, but Pelkey made no further move against him. He shook his head. "I forgot myself for a moment."

"Forget it," said Sargent. "Why don't you go home and get a good night's rest?"

"Home!" Pelkey laughed harshly. "The police are spying on me constantly. I can't rest, can't sleep. They think I killed Dan Sligo. The fools—!"

"Who did kill Sligo?" Sargent asked softly.

"Wouldn't you like to know?"

"Yes."

"Well, you won't know. Nor will anyone else—except the one who killed him. You're off the track—all of you. 'Way, 'way off. Ben Chapman doesn't . . ." He grimaced. "Ben Chapman . . . ah!"

Pelkey whirled suddenly, jerked open the door and leaped through. When Sar-

gent got to the hall, Pelkey was taking the front stairs, three at a time.

WHEN Sargent got to the office the next morning he found a half dozen copies of the new *Turkey Talk*. He picked one up and it opened at the editorial page, which also contained the masthead. He noticed his name: Frank Sargent, Managing Editor. Then his eyes fell to the editorial. It was not the one he had seen in galley form. That had been a comparatively harmless one, a mere discussion of the turkey industry. The one in print was a blast against Hanson Hill, the owner of the competitive *Turkey Tracks*. It was plain, unadulterated libel — if Chapman couldn't back it up.

"Hanson Hill," the editorial stated, "has no more business publishing a turkey journal than I have trying to swim in the Fiji Islands—and I can't swim. Hill knows less about the publishing business, or any kind of business, than I know about the Neanderthal tribal customs. When I began *Turkey Talk* Hill came to me and begged me to employ him as a subscription solicitor. I put him on and sent him down to the Ozarks, among his own people. He took a few subscription orders, but he spent most of his time organizing a turkey pool. He persuaded those poor, deluded hill-billies that they could get a higher price for their market turkeys if they pooled them together and obtained bids from the commission houses. The bids came and every bid was identical—ten cents per pound below the regular market prices. Who sold out the pool to the commission houses? That is the question every Ozark turkey raiser should ask.

"When Hill first came to me he had only one shirt, which he laundered himself in his furnished room, every other Thursday. Yet a few months later—right after the turkey pool debacle—Hanson Hill had enough funds to start a turkey journal—a costly enterprise, I can assure you—"

There was more along the same lines. Frank Sargent read it all twice. Never in his life had he read a more scurrilous, libelous attack on a man's character. And Ben O. Chapman had the nerve to sign his name to the editorial: "Ben O. Chapman, Publisher."

Sargent was still thinking about the editorial when the master's voice called from his office. He had apparently come in while Sargent was reading.

He went to Ben O. Chapman's office. The publisher waved a letter opener at him. "Why'd you run out last night?"

"I was all in," Sargent lied. "I had a toothache all the night before and didn't get a wink of sleep."

Chapman sniffed. "Humph! You missed the fun. That policeman punched Lew Thayer in the nose, finally, to sober him up. What'd you think of the girls?"

Sargent thought of Eileen. "Eileen's a pippin!"

"She'll do—for Chicago. New Orleans is the place where they have good looking wenches, if you like Southern girls. If you don't, go to Minneapolis. Personally, I like the girls in San Francisco."

"You never married, did you?" Sargent asked.

"Me? Yes, nine-ten years ago. It didn't take. As I was saying, I fired Lew Thayer. Should have done it weeks ago. I can't stand an advertising salesman who drinks. Close the door, Sargent. Now, listen! You're an experienced snoop; I mean, interviewer. I want you to do some important *private* work for me. I want you to locate Ernest Pelkey."

"Ernest Pelkey?" exclaimed Sargent.

"Yes! The fellow who had your job ahead of you. You heard that policeman mention his name last night. That's the man. He's left his home—hiding, no doubt. Well, I want you to find him. His wife'll know where he is. Pump her. Or the neighbors. Put in your full time, all day. Find Pelkey and the minute you do—"

"Yes?"

"Tell me where he is and I—I'll speak to him."

Sargent frowned. "But Lieutenant Fanning said the police were looking for him. They can do a much better job than—"

"No they can't! They're boobs. Besides—I want to talk to Pelkey *before* the police reach him. That's why you've got to find him. I'll give you a five-dollar raise if you locate him."

"Today?"

"Today or tomorrow at the latest. Take the day off and find Pelkey. Don't come back without him. No, I don't mean that. Just find him. Hurry!"

As Sargent had told Ernest Pelkey only the night before, a job's a job. Sargent was just as glad to earn seven dollars a day going around questioning people as sitting in the office, trimming galley proofs or entering subscriptions.

HE GOT his hat and left the office. He walked north to Lake Street, and climbing the elevated stairs, boarded a train for River Forest.

Fifty minutes later he strode briskly down the dead-end street toward the neat, white Cape Cod cottage of the Pelkeys.

He opened the gate in the white picket fence and approached the door. Reaching it he rang the doorbell. It was opened almost instantly by Hester Pelkey and Sargent marveled at the beauty of her. He'd almost forgotten.

He said: "Excuse me, Mrs. Pelkey, I represent the Trotter Institute of—"

And then she recognized him. "You!" she gasped. "Why—why, how dare you! I mean—" So she knew that he was working for Ben O. Chapman.

How did she know that?

He said to Mrs. Pelkey: "I'm sorry, Mrs. Pelkey. I work for Ben Chapman and he's asked me to tell Ernest that he wants to talk to him about something urgent."

"Go away," whispered Hester Pelkey. "I won't talk to you."

She started to close the door on Sargent and he said, quickly, "Ernest came to see me last night."

She stopped closing the door. "What do you mean—last night?"

"It was shortly after eleven; I'd been out and when I returned to my room he was there—inside the room."

She stared at him, bewildered. "But that was after—"

"Yes," he said. "I'll tell you the truth. I was at a party at Ben Chapman's apartment. While I was there a policeman came to tell Chapman that Ernest had disappeared. And then when I went home he was there."

He could see the pain in her eyes, the question, too, that she didn't want to ask.

"He was all right, a bit wrought-up, but all right."

Hester Pelkey suddenly pulled the door open. "Please—come in."

He followed her into a tiny living room that was as neat as herself. Hester Pelkey seated herself wearily on a sofa and after a moment's hesitation, Sargent took a morris chair.

"Mrs. Pelkey," he said, "I'm going to tell you exactly how I stand. I've been working as a Trotter field man for some months. It's part time work and doesn't pay too well. When I called here the other day I had nothing on my mind more than to get another card filled out. I called here by the sheerest accident. And then Ernest —forgive me if this hurts—acted so strangely that I became curious to see what kind of person could do to Ernest what had obviously been done to him. I had to quiz some business men anyway so I called on Chapman. I never got in a word edgewise. Chapman went into a monologue and before I knew it I was hired as editor of *Turkey Talk.*"

"I know that," said Hester Pelkey. "Now, I'll make a confession. Jim Robertson telephoned Ernest yesterday and told him about you . . . that very same thing."

"Oh," said Sargent, somewhat deflated. "Then if you knew, I don't understand . . ."

"Nor did Ernest. Or I. You're a new employee of Chapman's, you scarcely know him—yet Chapman has confided in you. He asked you to one of his parties. Ernest was the only employee of Chapman's who was ever thus honored."

Sargent's forehead creased. "Chapman is a fantastic character. He is a mass of contradictions. Yet underneath, I'm convinced is a shrewd brain. Your husband has something that Chapman wants—"

"Of course!"

Sargent looked at her sharply, questioningly. "It's—stock in *Business Journals?*"

"Yes! One share."

Sargent inhaled softly. "The controlling share. Chapman owns fifty percent of *Business Journals,* Sligo—I mean, Mrs. Sligo, forty-nine. If she should happen to get the extra share, she'd be an equal owner of the business. But I don't see how that would give her any advantage. It would be a standoff."

"That's right, but there happens to be still another share of stock. Chapman owns only forty-nine, Mrs. Sligo forty-nine."

"Who owns this other share?"

"I don't know."

"Ernest knows?"

Hester Pelkey shook her lovely head. "No, he doesn't. No one knows."

SARGENT stared. "But that's absurd. Somebody's got to know. I don't know much about business law, but I've heard that stockholders' names must be recorded."

"That's right. Theoretically. From what I gathered, the way Ernest told it, a corporation has to have at least three different stockholders. But neither Chapman or Sligo trusted each other. Sligo wouldn't let Chapman have more stock than he had. So they compromised. Each took forty-nine shares, then each sold—or gave one share to another person, whom they figured they controlled. Ernest got his share from Chapman. He voted the stock the way Chapman wanted, whenever there was occasion."

"And Sligo?"

"Sligo wouldn't tell."

"But he had to put a name on the books."

"He put down the name of Hanson Hill."

"Hanson Hill!" gasped Sargent.

"That's right. But Hill held possession of the stock only long enough to get his name on the company's books. Then he sold it back to Sligo. At least, that's what Ernest *thought.* But he said that Sligo never voted that share of stock, not in the last year, and therefore Chapman had virtual control of the company, because he voted, with Ernest's share, fifty percent against forty-nine. However, if Chapman doesn't get Ernest's share, he will be in a bad way . . . particularly if Hanson Hill's share should somehow turn up in the possession of Mrs. Sligo."

"Mrs. Sligo," Sargent said, thoughtfully. "Maybe I've underestimated the old girl."

"Why?"

"No reason. I was just wondering."

"You take the affairs of *Business Journals* very seriously. After all, you're only—"

There was an undercurrent of resentment in her tone and Sargent said, quickly, "I'm only an employee—yes. I admit that Ben Chapman's not the type of man I'd deliberately seek for an employer, but the little I've seen of the trade paper business, makes me want to go on in it. I want to learn as much as I can at *Business Journals,* then get a place with another house. After all, there must be hundreds of trade journals—"

"Two thousand," said Hester Pelkey. "There isn't an industry, trade or profession that doesn't have its trade journal. I'm quoting. I've heard it a dozen times, fifty times. Ernest—"

"I'm sorry," Sargent said. "I think I know what you're going through and I'd

like to help you. That's why I think Ernest should be found at once. He needs help—medical care and a good rest. The sooner he's found the sooner he'll return to normal."

"I know," Mrs. Pelkey said with a catch in her voice. "But I told you the truth; I don't know where he is. I had to go out for a few minutes last night—to the store. When I returned he was gone."

"But don't you know where he would be apt to go?"

"If I did," said Hester Pelkey with quiet dignity, "would I be here talking to you? I would be with him."

Sargent got up. "Thank you, Mrs. Pelkey. Just one thing more; will you look upon me as a *friend,* even though I work for Ben Chapman?"

Mrs. Pelkey smiled faintly. "I see no reason to regard you as an enemy." That was the most she would give him. The hostility was still there. He started to leave, but paused at the door. "By the way, was Ernest home the evening before last?"

Her lips started to form the monosyllable "no," then the significance of the question hit her and her eyes were jolted wide open.

"Yes!" she gasped. "Of course he was. I was with him all evening."

"Thank you, Mrs. Pelkey," said Sargent. "Good-by."

HE LEFT the little white cottage and then walked to the elevated station. Riding back to the city he stared out of the window at the rooftops of the shabby west side houses. There was a frown of concentration and annoyance on his face, which did not clear until he reached the Loop.

Descending to Van Buren Street he entered a drug store and looked up an address in the telephone directory. Then he walked swiftly across the Loop to Clark and Randolph, where he entered a dingy building that could have been a twin of the Dockery on the south side of the Loop.

He consulted the building directory, then climbed the stairs to the second floor. After a moment he paused before a ground glass door panel on which was lettered:

Decker Detective Agency

He opened the door and stepped into a dingy office. It contained a rickety desk behind which sat a redheaded girl who was reading a copy of *Snappy Detective Stories.* On the opposite side of the room, almost concealed by the opened door was a bench on which was stretched Mr. Wilting, the detective. He looked like he hadn't slept in three nights.

"Ah," said Sargent," Mr. Wilting!"

The redhead lowered her magazine. "You wish to see Mr. Decker? He's out at the moment, a big case."

"I want to see Mr. Wilting," Sargent said.

Mr. Wilting opened his eyes slightly, but made no other movement.

"I work for Ben O. Chapman," Sargent said. "Remember?"

Mr. Wilting blinked to indicate that he did remember.

"Mr. Chapman sent me here," Sargent said, crisply. "He didn't want to call you from the office, because Mrs. Sligo is there with her attorney and an accountant."

"Yeah," whispered Mr. Wilting, sleepily.

"He wanted to know if you'd learned anything since your last report."

"Yeah," said the detective.

"What?"

Mr. Wilting's eyes closed altogether.

"He's gone," said the redheaded secretary. "Try building a fire under him."

"I'm awake," said the great detective. "I'm just conserving energy."

"You must be full of it, then," said Sargent sarcastically. "Since you don't use any . . . Do you mind giving me a report on what you've learned about Mr. Sligo?"

"Gertrude," said Wilting, without turn-

ing his head. "Call up Ben Chapman. Ask him if it's all right."

"Of course it's all right," snapped Sargent. "He sent me here. No need to call him at the office. In fact, he doesn't want you to."

"Got to," said Wilting. "Don't know you from the Emperor Hirohito. Information's confidential."

Sargent looked contemptuously at the detective. "I doubt if you'd learned anything, anyway."

Wilting began to snore gently. Exasperated, Sergant turned and left the office. On the street, he looked uncertainly to the south. Then he shrugged and went into a drug store and ordered a Coca Cola. Finished, he paid his check and walked to the telephone directory stand. He looked up Hanson Hill, but couldn't find the name, so tried *Turkey Tracks*. He found:

Turkey Tracks, Inc., 798 N. Clark Street.

He left the drug store and took a street car to Chicago Avenue. A few minutes later he approached a dingy two-story building. The windows were painted black, halfway to the top, but dirty white lettering on the black read:

Community Print Shop
Job Printing

Sargent opened the door directly into a print shop. A linotype at the back of the shop made a continuous clatter and near the front, an ink-stained youth was feeding letterheads into a Kelly press.

Just inside the door a man sat at a littered desk. He had a stack of postcards in front of him and was writing with a fountain pen. He was a long, beanpole of a man with eyebrows as black and bushy as those of John L. Lewis. Sitting down, Sargent could not guess his height, but knew that it was considerable. Yet the man probably weighed no more than 120 pounds.

He poised his fountain pen over the stack of postcards and looked up. "Yes, sir?" he said.

"I'm looking for Hanson Hill."

"What for? I mean, why do you want him?"

Sargent said: "I represent the Trotter Institute of Public Opinion. Mr. Hill has been selected as a representative business man whose opinion we would like to obtain on important topics of the day."

The lean man put down his fountain pen, pushed back his chair and hooked his thumbs into his suspenders. "Mister, I'm Hanson Hill and I'm proud to know you. I've heard of that there poll of your'n and I'd be mighty glad to give you my opinion. I'm on the right side, too. I'm from Missouri and my folks allus been Demycrats, as far back as before the War —the War between the States."

Sargent scribbled on one of his Trotter blanks, "That's fine, Mr. Hill. Now, if you'll just answer these questions—"

WHEN he had finished, Sargent said, "Now, Mr. Hill, let's see, you're in the publishing business. What do you publish?"

"The best damn turkey paper in the country. *Turkey Tracks*. A real turkey journal for turkey folks, put out by a man who knows turkeys. That's me."

"How interesting. There are other turkey journals besides yours?"

The black patches of fur that were Hanson Hill's eyebrows drew together. "There is a skunk here in town gets out a magazine, called *Turkey Talk*. He don't know no more 'bout turkeys than my Aunt Mamie does about flyin' an airplane. Furthermore, I figure to ventilate him one of these-here fine days. He's got no call to make dirty cracks at me."

"Ah," said Sargent, "a business feud."

"It's a feud, all right. Y'see, 'bout a year ago I came here to Chicago to see 'bout getting me a job of work. I seen this-here *Turkey Talk* and shucks, it struck

home. Back in Missouri we *raised* turkeys. Finest Bourbon Red turkeys you ever laid eyes on. So I went up to this-here Ben Chapman and I says to him, 'Mister, you got yourself a turkey journal, but you don't know nothin' about raisin' turkeys. I know turkeys, but I ain't got a turkey journal, so how 'bout having a merger?' Well, he was smart enough to see my point and we made a deal. I was to go out in the turkey country and get him subscriptions for his journal, a dollar per year's term and I was to send him fifty cents of that. Also, I was to try to get turkey folks to advertise in the journal, this-here Chapman promisin' to pay me twenty-five percent on all the money he got from the advertising."

"Well," said Sargent, "that sounds like a reasonable proposition. Where does the feud come in?"

"Why, Shucks, I was tellin' you about that. There wasn't but one turkey journal in the whole country and when folks'd see it, they'd just naturally want to subscribe to it. Heck, I got 220 subscriptions the first month I was working. I had to send this-here Chapman a hun'erd and ten dollars of that, which didn't seem fair to me. I was the man gettin' the orders for him and all he was doin' was sendin' these subscribers a little magazine, that didn't cost him more'n a cent and a half a copy to print. Well, Jumpin' Joe Shelby, that didn't seem right to me, so I found me this-here Community Print Shop and I says to Mr. Community, I mean, Mr. Dick Matoon, who really owns the place, I says to him, 'Mr. Matoon, let's me and you start a turkey journal. I'll get the subscriptions and advertisin' and you print her.' So that's what we done and now look what this-here skunk Chapman says—"

Hanson Hill picked up the copy of *Turkey Talk* and turned to the editorial page. He read: " 'When Hill first came to me he had only one shirt which he laundered himself in his furnished room every other Thursday.' Now what do you think of that?"

"I'd say it was dirty—not the shirt, the editorial. It isn't true, of course?"

"You danged right it ain't. And I resent it. I washed that-there shirt *twice a week* and what's more I ironed it, too. I got me a good notion to go down and horse-whip this Chapman fella."

"Chapman, did you say?" Sargent exclaimed, suddenly. "Say, isn't he the publisher whose name was in the papers a couple of days ago—something about a murder committed in his office?"

"Yeah, that's the fella sure 'nough. Chapman's partner, Sligo, was bumped off. Wasn't much loss, though. He was almost as bad as Chapman. He gave me a share of stock, sold it to me for a dollar. I seen a chance to make a small profit on it—"

"And you sold the stock?"

"Yeah, sure. Fella offered me twenty-five dollars. I needed the money for travelin' expenses, on account of Chapman not giving me enough to get back to Missouri. Then this Sligo wanted me to sell him back the stock and got awful mad when I told him I'd already sold it."

"To whom did you sell it?"

Hanson Hill's bushy eyebrows came up. "Why? You wouldn't know the fellow."

"Of course not. I merely became interested in your story."

"Well, it was a young fellow working in the place. Fella named—" And then, with the name on the very tip of his tongue, Hanson Hill shrugged and sighed. "Got to get to work, Mister."

Crestfallen, Sargent could do nothing but thank Hill for giving him the quiz information and take his departure. Outside he saw that it was twelve-thirty and so he got a bite of food in a drug store and rode back to the offices of *Business Journals*.

Ben O. Chapman was out of the office, but Robertson winked at Sargent and followed him to his private office, closing the door.

"I told you that the wall between my office and Chapman's is thin and he

doesn't bother to keep his voice down—I mean the detective stuff, Frank?"

Sargent grimaced. "To hell with Chapman. I'm figuring on quitting."

"Why? Jobs are scarce. If they weren't I wouldn't be here myself— Did you see Mrs. Pelkey?"

Sargent nodded. "She feels pretty badly about Ernest. They're pretty newly-married, aren't they?"

"Oh, no. Three years or more. Matter of fact, they didn't hit it off so well, but with Ernest having this breakdown she feels duty bound to remain loyal to him."

Sargent looked thoughtfully at Robertson. "What do you think yourself of Ernest Pelkey—I mean, mentally?"

"I don't think there's any question about that, Frank. He's definitely gone. I hate to admit that because we were very close—Chapman drove him mad."

"*Was* it Chapman, Jim?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean he stood it two years; why should he suddenly go off the deep end?"

"It wasn't sudden. Ernest was getting nervous for some time. Months."

"Ever since Hanson Hill worked here?"

"The turkey raiser? I doubt if he and Ernest had more than two words together. None of us had much to do with him."

"Oh, Hill's been here as recent as that?"

"He only left about three months ago. About four months, that is. He went on a trip, then, but was supposed to be working for us until three months ago. Chapman claims that the last month he was working for himself. It's one of the things he had against Hill. Have you met Hill?"

"This morning. He didn't strike me as being a very formidable competitor. Did you read the editorial in this month's *Turkey Talk?*"

"I always read all his editorials. That's the only fun I get around here."

Ben Chapman's step sounded in the corridor, then his whining voice exclaimed: "Sargent, are you here?"

"Yes!"

"All right, you're fired. Pack your things and get out."

Sargent gasped and even Jim Robertson's mouth fell open. Sargent kicked back his chair and got to the door of his office, as Chapman came up to it. Chapman's lips were pressed in a thin, straight line.

"If there's one thing I won't tolerate, it's disloyalty," said Chapman.

"Chapman . . ." began Sargent, hotly, "you beat me to it by about two minutes. I was going to quit. But before I go, let me tell you something—"

"Save your breath! Come into my office and I'll give you your money up to this minute. You're through and I won't even give you a reference."

A haze of red danced before Frank Sargent's eyes. For a moment he fought an almost uncontrollable impulse to smash Chapman in the face. But he conquered the impulse and throwing up his hands followed the publisher into his office.

Inside, Chapman turned on him. "Now, what's this about quitting?"

"Quitting? You fired me—"

"Maybe I will, yet. I'm greatly disappointed in you, Sargent. I had high hopes for you. You have initiative and imagination. But I can't stand disloyalty in a man. Why did you go to the Decker office this morning?"

Sargent groaned. "So that's it. Wilting called you up. Why, dammit, you told me to find Ernest Pelkey, didn't you?"

"I did, but what has he got to do with Wilting?"

"I don't know. You wouldn't tell me a damn thing. You expect me to find him in a dark cave?"

"I told you all that was necessary to know about Pelkey. It wasn't necessary to pump Wilting about my personal affairs—"

"Personal, hell! You want Pelkey because he's got a share of stock that you're afraid will get into Mrs. Sligo's hands. All right, you were having Sligo shadowed— Why?"

"That's none of your concern."

"It isn't, if I'm working here as an editor. It *is,* if I'm acting as your personal detective and stool pigeon. Pelkey's disappearance is tied up with Sligo's death and if I'm to find Pelkey for you, I've got to know something about Sligo."

Ben Chapman stared at Sargent in astonishment. "Why, yes, I never thought about it that way. Humph! Very clever of you, Sargent. Yes, yes! You go right ahead. I'm more than half-convinced myself that Pelkey killed Sligo—"

"I didn't say that."

"But you meant it."

"I did not! Now, are you going to tell me about Sligo?"

"Of course. What do you want to know about him?"

"Everything. How long was he your partner?"

"A year."

"Is that all? I've been under the impression it was much longer."

"A year was too long. I never had a partner before. Had a little bad luck. With editors. Three-four of them quit me and started competitive magazines. Too many magazines in a field kills it for everyone. I had to drop a couple of magazines. I sold *The Hog Dog Stand* at a loss. It cost me a lot of money to establish *Creep & Crawl* and *Turkey Talk* and *The Skating Rink.* I had to get some outside capital and the bank wouldn't lend it to me. That's how Sligo got in here, the loafer!"

The door of Chapman's office was kicked open and Mrs. Sligo filled the doorway. "I heard that, Ben Chapman! You low-down, sniveling, whining, good-for-nothing! Speak ill of the dead, will you? Dan Sligo was the kindest man who ever—"

"He didn't say that of you!" Chapman shouted. "He said you nagged him morning and noon and woke him up in the middle of the night to nag some more."

"That's a lie, Ben Chapman! A dirty, filthy lie. How dare you talk like that to me?"

"Then learn to hold your tongue."

"Me hold my tongue? What about yours? It's longer than a hyena's. And louder. No wonder your wife walked out on you. She couldn't stand your slimy tongue."

"When you're finished," Chapman said, coldly. "I'll get back to work."

"*You* work?" Mrs. Sligo said, scornfully. "Twiddle your thumbs—until the day after tomorrow. Then *I'll* tell you a thing or two. And just to keep you awake, chew on this: Mr. Duma is about finished with the books and he's discovered some very, very interesting things!"

Mrs. Sligo slammed the door as she flounced out.

"All women," said Chapman, "should be drowned at birth. Let's see, where were we?"

"You were talking about Sligo," Sargent said, in a low tone.

"Ah, yes, my partner. Sligo came along at the psychological time. He put in twenty thousand, which tided the business over for a few months until I put it on its feet—"

"Yes," said Sargent. "And you gave Ernest Pelkey one share of stock at the time. . . ."

"He stole it!" snapped Chapman. "The thief! You've got to have at least three stockholders in a corporation so I issued a share to Pelkey—purely a matter of convenience, you understand. I put his name on the books, but didn't actually give him the stock. I kept it myself—and then he stole it. That's why I fired him, the in-

grate! After what I did for him, too."

"How do you know he stole it?"

"Who else would have taken it? His name was on the certificate. It wouldn't be worth anything to anyone, unless Pelkey himself transferred it."

"Do you think he might have?"

Chapman swallowed with difficulty. "I don't think so — not yet. But that woman—"

"Mrs. Pelkey?"

"No, no, Mrs. Sligo. She's awfully sure of herself. She doesn't *know* that I haven't Pelkey's stock to vote, yet—"

"So, you think she has you outvoted 50 to 49?"

"Mrs. Sligo only has forty-nine shares." Chapman scowled. "All right, maybe she's got fifty. Daniel and I each took forty-nine, then each gave a share to an employee. Daniel probably got his back, right away."

"He didn't. Hanson Hill sold it."

"How do you know?"

"He told me."

"When did you talk to Hanson Hill?" cried Chapman.

"This noon."

"You *talked* to him? Sargent—why did you do—that?"

"BECAUSE I thought I might get some information. Oh, don't worry. I didn't identify myself. I called on him as a Trotter Poll man. I quizzed him and then pumped him about his personal affairs."

"What did he say?"

"He said he washed his shirt *twice* a week."

Ben Chapman reddened. "Damn it, Sargent, your levity will get the best of you some day. I hate a practical joker."

"Well, that was what he seemed the maddest about. He let out that he'd sold the share of stock shortly after Sligo had given it to him. To someone in this office."

Chapman got white. "Here? . . . Who?"

"He didn't tell. I asked him but he clamped down about that time. I couldn't press the point, because of my position."

Ben O. Chapman slumped down in his chair. Perspiration was beading his forehead. "I told you they hated me. All of them. They've sold me out. Mrs. Sligo has the stock and she'll throw me out of my own business. Oh . . . if I'd only kept the *Sugar Beet Review,* this would never have happened. I'm a ruined man. Go away, Sargent!"

"I'm fired?"

"What's the use? Mrs. Sligo will throw us all out the day after tomorrow."

Sargent slipped out of the office and returned to his own. After a few moments of pulling himself together he picked up the stack of mail that had accumulated on his desk during the morning. Most of it was subscription mail and had already been slit open and the currency and checks extracted.

There was an article from a turkey contributor on how to eradicate worms in turkeys. It was written in pencil on ruled tablet paper. Sargent read it with considerable distaste. He put it to one side and then saw the special delivery letter. It was addressed to:

Frank Sargent
c/o Business Journals, Inc.
Dockery Bldg.
Chicago, Illinois

It was marked *"Personal & Confidential."*

Sargent slit open the envelope flap with one blade of his galley-proof trimming shears. He took out a single sheet of paper.

The message was a brief, but a shocking one. It read:

"Dear Mr. Sargent:

Since you're turning out to be such a good snoop, why don't you check up on Ben O. Chapman himself? Find out why his wife left him? And why was Chapman having Sligo shadowed? And don't overlook Chapman's herd of

trained seals. If you want the answers to these questions, come to the Armitage entrance of Lincoln Park at exactly four o'clock this afternoon. But come alone or you won't see—

—Your visitor of last night."

Ernest Pelkey. Sargent had sought him all morning and now Pelkey had come to him.

He looked at the envelope. It was postmarked 9:30 that morning and had probably been delivered at the office shortly before noon.

It was ten minutes after two, now. It would take him only twenty minutes to get to the place of the appointment, but Sargent was suddenly too restless to sit in the office. He put on his hat and went out, informing Mildred O'Kelly that he was going to call on an advertiser.

Outside he walked to Madison Street and turned westward. He passed the McVickers Theatre, then turned back and bought a ticket. Inside he sat in the air-conditioned auditorium and watched a picture without even knowing what it was about. His brain was in a turmoil. He wondered if he shouldn't telephone Mrs. Hester Pelkey and have her go with him to meet her husband.

But Pelkey had warned him not to bring anyone. If he did, he was as likely as not to disappear completely. At least he had established contact with Sargent and it was up to the latter to persuade the sick man to go home.

At three-thirty he left the theatre and walking back to Clark, boarded a street car. It was ten minutes to four when he got off at Armitage on the Lincoln Park side of the street. He strolled into the park a little way, then came back and stood on the sidewalk facing the traffic.

At one minute to four Ernest Pelkey suddenly parted a clump of bushes behind Sargent and stepped out. "I see you got my letter," he said.

Sargent whirled. "Hello, Pelkey. Yes, I got your letter. I also have a message from your wife. She's worried about you."

"Hester worried? Yah! Look, I'm going to give you the lowdown on Chapman. And Sligo and the whole damn business. I want money and I'll sell to the highest bidder. I'll—"

Pelkey was facing the street. His eyes suddenly bulged and his mouth fell open. "Look—out!" he cried and thrust both hands against Sargent's chest. The attack was so sudden Sargent was caught off balance and went over backwards to the sidewalk.

The bullets went over his head. He heard one smack into a tree, another made a dull "plop" . . . and then Ernest Pelkey fell over Frank Sargent.

Horrified, Sargent caught him in his arms, rolled him over and scrambled to his feet. His eyes darted to the street, saw the rear end of a green coupé roaring north up Clark. He strained his eyes in the instant that the license plate was still in sight, but could make out only the last two numbers —73.

A policeman's whistle blasted, women screamed and men cried out hoarsely as they converged upon Sargent and poor Ernest Pelkey.

"YOUR story's got more holes than that imitation Swiss cheese they been making in Wisconsin," said Lieutenant Fanning. "I don't like it at all."

"You've got the letter Pelkey mailed to me," Frank Sargent retorted.

"Yeah, and it shows pencil marks where it was sealed. Somebody opened the letter with a lead pencil, then glued it shut again. Damn funny you didn't notice it before. It was as plain as the Wrigley Building."

"But I wasn't looking for anything like that. I was so surprised to get a letter from Pelkey."

"He said, 'Your visitor of last night.' You didn't tell me last night he'd called on you."

"That was after I'd left Chapman's party. When I got home he was in my room."

"What'd he want?"

"He didn't say."

"The hell he didn't. Why'd he come up if he didn't say what he wanted?"

"Ask him."

"How can I? He's unconscious. The doc says he may never regain consciousness." Lieutenant Fanning looked darkly at Sargent. "I don't get this business at all. It's tied up with Sligo, I know that. But what's Chapman's wife got to do with it? I understand she left him years ago. He claims he's never heard a word from her. And why was he having Sligo shadowed?"

"You talked to his private detective the other day."

"Wilting? I didn't get a word out of him. You couldn't get anything out of Wilting, if you boiled him in oil. That guy's a human clam."

"You can't say that about Chapman, though. He talks plenty."

"Yeah, he talks," scoffed Fanning. "He talks like hell. But he doesn't say anything."

Sargent sighed wearily. "You read the letter; have you checked on the trained seals?"

"Chapman's office staff? I checked. That fellow Grosvenor Black was placing a bet in a poolroom. So he says. Pinky Boylan says he was there, but couldn't place the time within twenty minutes. Too much excitement. So Black's got an alibi — or hasn't. Robertson says officially he was calling on an advertiser; actually he was at the Oriental Theatre. Andrew Lawrence says officially he was calling on an advertiser; actually he was out getting a haircut at the Palmer House barber shop and buying a couple of shirts at Marshall Field's. He's got a haircut and showed me the shirts. But the time's too indefinite. So he's got an alibi, or hasn't—"

"And Mrs. Sligo?"

"She got mad at Ben Chapman and went home. Her attorney and accountant were at the office. So was that redheaded switchboard operator."

"And Ben O. Chapman himself?"

Fanning scowled. "He wouldn't tell. But he's got a swollen nose and there's dried blood on his chin. He says it's where Lew Thayer popped him last night, but it looks fresher to me." Fanning took a quick turn about his office, then whirled and gave Sargent a black look. "I don't like it, Sargent. I got to let you go, because there were too damn many witnesses who said the shot came from a passing car—but watch your step, Sargent."

"I'm watching," said Sargent.

It was after nine in the evening when Sargent left the police station. Instead of going to his room at the Ajax Hotel, Sargent rode downtown in the elevated and got a room for the night at the Morrison Hotel. A tower room. He bolted the door on the inside and in a few minutes was in bed.

SARGENT got to the office a little after nine and found Mildred O'Kelly and Jim Robertson already there. He got the impression that their greetings lacked the customary warmth.

He said, "Well, what's the score?"

"Nothing to nothing," Robertson replied. "Ernest Pelkey was my friend."

"Was? He's—"

Robertson nodded. "He never regained consciousness."

Sargent left them by the little switchboard and went into his private office. He sat at his desk until he heard Grosvenor Black come in and get the news from Jim Robertson.

Grosvenor's high-pitched voice exclaimed: "And things ran so smoothly here before this Sargent fellow came."

"I guess it isn't his fault," Sargent heard Robertson say. "It's Chapman. And things never ran smoothly around Chapman. Even if it meant losing my job, I'd

rather one of them had been . . . Chapman."

"Jim!" cried Mildred O'Kelly.

"I don't give a damn," said Robertson. "I'm fed up . . . up to my ears. If I had even last week's wages left I'd chuck it."

"I've got a good horse today," Grosvenor Black volunteered. "Kensico in the fourth at Havre de Grace."

"Frank!" called Mildred O'Kelly. "Telephone. It's—the boss!"

Sargent walked to the switchboard, picked up the handset.

"Sargent," he said.

"You're fired," Ben O. Chapman snapped, without preamble. "I don't want you around the office when I get there."

"I was just leaving," Sargent snarled. He banged the set on the prongs and strode out of the office. He almost collided with Mrs. Sligo, just emerging from the elevator.

"Well!" she exclaimed. "You're starting early today—leaving the office."

"Mrs. Sligo," Sargent said, "go sit on a tack. A big one!" He stepped into the elevator. "Going down!"

Outside, Sargent boarded a street car and rode to North Avenue. There he transferred to a westbound car and a few minutes later swung off at Larrabee Street.

A few doors west of Larrabee he entered a bank and approached the *Savings* window. "How much have I got in my account?" he asked.

The teller went off to look it up, returning in a moment. "Ninety-two, fifty."

"That was all the money Sargent had been able to save in the last year. He said, "I want to draw out eighty-seven, fifty."

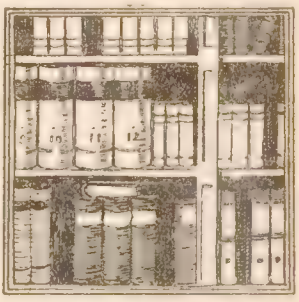
"Very well, Mr. Sargent. If you'll just fill out this form."

With the money in his pocket he walked back to Larrabee and crossing the diagonal Ogden Avenue entered the elevated station.

Fifteen minutes later he descended to the street on Wells and Randolph and walking eastward to Michigan, entered the tall building opposite the public library. A sign outside the building read *John Crerar Library.*

The building directory told him that "trade journals" were on the eighth floor and he rode up in the elevator. He entered the trade journal room and scouted the rack containing *Sugar Beet Review.* He found it to be a nine by twelve, thirty-two-page magazine.

The masthead gave the publishing address as Superior Street, Duluth, Minnesota, and the publisher as Louis J. Suttles. Mr. Suttles was also listed as editor.



The volume number was sixteen, which told Sargent that the magazine was sixteen years old. There were four full pages of advertising in the issue and enough small ads to make up a total of nine pages.

Approaching the desk to ask a question pertaining to *Sugar Beet Review* he asked, "Do you have any back numbers of the *Sugar Beet Review?"*

"How far back?" the attendant asked.

"From the time the magazine was started —sixteen years?"

"That's pretty far back," said the attendant, "we usually only keep them that long for the important magazines."

"*Sugar Beet Review* isn't considered an important journal? I'm just curious to know how it rates with other trade journals."

"It doesn't. It's one of the cats and dogs. The important trade journals are *Traffic World, Hardware Age, Progressive Grocer* and magazines like that."

The attendant went off to check up on *Sugar Beet Review.* He returned after almost five minutes, carrying a double arm load of bound volumes.

"Strangely enough," he said, "we have bound volumes of the really old issues, but none between two and eight years ago."

Sargent took the books to a table and opened up Volume One. It was dated June, 1925. The masthead gave the publisher as the *Sugar Beet Publishing Company,* Sebewaing, Michigan. The editor's name was Julian Herlands. The magazine was a poorly printed 16-page affair, with but four pages of advertising.

In the second issue it picked up two and a half pages of advertising and jumped to twelve pages in the third issue. At this time the total number of pages also increased to twenty-four.

It remained this size for the remainder of Volume One, and halfway through Volume Two when the magazine went up to 32 pages and carried seventeen pages of advertising. The masthead in addition to the editor's name now carried the name of Leroy Somers as advertising manager, and the publishing address was changed to Bay City, Michigan.

Leroy Somers must have been a good advertising man, for the magazine showed a steady gain in advertising until the summer of 1929 when it reached a peak of 68 pages of advertising. The magazine now contained 128 pages and was a handsomely printed job.

BY THIS time the staff was greatly augmented. Leroy Somers had been promoted to publisher. Herlands was still editor, but a man named Fenwick was managing editor, and there were two associate editors named Billingsly and Hogate. And a new star had appeared as advertising manager. His name was Benj. O. Chapman!

The magazine held its own for three issues with Benj. O. Chapman as advertising manager, but in the fourth Chapman dropped the "j" from Ben and the advertising took a nose-dive to a paltry 47 pages of advertising. Of course this was in the fall of 1929 and the stock market crash may have had something to do with that. A month later the name of Hogate was dropped as associate editor. Fenwick went in February, 1930, and Billingsly was promoted to the post of managing editor. The associate editorships remained vacant. In this month the magazine was a scanty 48-page issue, with only nineteen of those pages containing advertising.

It had twenty pages of advertising in May and twenty-two in June. The boys were fighting hard. But the forces of the depression were too strong. In August came the crack-up. Leroy Somers and Julian Herlands went! *The Sugar Beet Publishing Company* was dissolved and replaced by the Billingsly-Chapman Publishing Company. The masthead now carried the names of Robert Billingsly as President and Editor and Ben O. Chapman, Vice-President and Advertising Manager. Also the publishing office was moved to Duluth, Minnesota.

An editorial told of the reorganization and complained bitterly of the competition of the Cuban and Philippine cane sugar. There was a whining note to it that suggested the hand of the advertising manager had written the editorial instead of the editor.

The new organization, with its trimmed overhead, ran along a little better for five or six months, picking up a few pages of advertising. But in the early part of 1931, the bottom seemed to fall out of the sugar beet market—at least the sugar beet advertising for it plummeted to an appalling eight pages in one issue. It carried that amount for two more issues, then dipped to seven.

Holding his breath in anticipation, Sargent turned to the masthead of the next issue, the June, 1931 issue. It had happened! Billingsly was gone. Ben O. Chapman was Editor and Publisher of the

Sugar Beet Review, and the name of the publishing company had been changed to Chapman Publishing Company.

Coincidentally, the advertising leaped to fourteen pages, exactly doubling the previous issue. Without even aware that he did it, Frank Sargent let out a sigh of relief and drew a deep breath of anticipation. Ben Chapman had written a sizzler of an editorial, in which he blasted the U. S. Congress, Cuba and the Philippines. He insisted that the U. S. should cast adrift the Philippines. Let Japan take them if she would. In the next paragraph he advocated the annexation of Cuba, declaring that it was necessary to the defense of the United States.

Chapman remained publisher and editor for four issues and the magazine skyrocketed until it was again 96 pages with 54 of them advertising. Ben O. Chapman now relinquished the editorial post to a man named Smythe. Two months later the editor's name was Burton and a month after that, Mathews. Mathews remained for four long months and was then replaced by Carter who lasted three months. Dumont assumed the editorial reins for two issues, to be replaced by Erlinger. With Erlinger, Chapman became fed up with male editors and took on Ruth K. Reese who must have been a whiz of an editor, for she remained on the job for nine consecutives issues. Then Chapman went back to men and Frank Sargent gave up trying to follow the different names.

He counted the advertising, however, and discovered that Chapman was doing very well indeed for depression years. In the summer of 1933 the magazine was almost as thick as a mail order journal and carried in excess of eighty pages of advertising. Chapman was now blasting the N.R.A. in his editorials.

Sargent skipped two or three issues, then noted that the magazine was again becoming thinner. He counted an issue and found that it contained fifty-seven pages of advertising.

An editorial decried the Versailles Treaty and demanded that the United States collect the European war debts at the point of the navy's 16-inch guns. Ben Chapman volunteered his own services to take over Cuba.

The December, 1933 issue carried only 21 pages of advertising and Chapman declared that the Brain Trust was ruining the country. The only thing that would save it was the immediate annexation of Cuba and the collection of the War Debts.

In June, 1934, Chapman gave the Philippines to Japan and included Mexico in his annexation filibuster. The magazine carried 13 pages of advertising and a man named Wagonholtz was the new editor.

THE next month Chapman brought the war home and published a scathing denunciation of the domestic sugar beet industry because it would not support its own trade journal. Ferdinand Hooper was the editor, this month.

In August and September Chapman went back to the Carribean, with a side excursion to Washington where he proposed a ten cent a pound tariff on cane sugar. He gave Mexico back to the Mexicans, as unworthy of this country's time and trouble. He put out a feeler, however for Bermuda, the Barbados and Jamaica, which he expanded in October to an outright demand, as part payment of the War Debts. The October issue showed a nice improvement in advertising and November looked like old times, with 34 pages of advertising. It held that many through December and January of 1935 and then Sargent received a shock.

Chapman was gone! He had sold the magazine to Louis J. Suttles. The jingoistic Chapman who had fought cane sugar and Cuba, the Philippines and Great Britain, France and the Versailles Treaty—and countless reluctant advertisers—had given up the battle.

Louis Suttles had bought the magazine in January of 1934 and was still the owner. Sargent closed the last bound vol-

ume and returned the entire stack to the librarian's desk. He saw with a start that it was four-thirty in the afternoon. He had spent hours with the *Sugar Beet Review* and its Horatio Algerish hero, Ben O. Chapman.

He left the Crerar Library and after standing on the corner of Michigan and Randolph for a few minutes, began walking slowly southward. At Madison he turned west and plodded through throngs of workers homeward bound. He crossed the river and approached Canal Street and the huge Northwestern Depot. Even though his footsteps had carried him there, he looked at the building with a start.

Then he entered. At the information desk they informed him that the train for Duluth left at five-thirty and reached the northern city at nine in the morning. The fare, including Pullman, was $14.00.

Sargent was on the train when it pulled out of the depot. His only baggage was a small parcel containing a shirt, a change of linen, a toothbrush and a cheap razor that he had purchased in the station.

FRANK SARGENT'S first sight of Duluth was not an inspiring one. He stepped down from the train and looked out upon a maze of railroad tracks. Leaving the depot he crossed the tracks and approached the Mesabe Depot a block away. He whistled as he regarded the steep hill ahead of him. Cars were climbing it in low gear, but he expected any moment that one or two would be unable to make it and roll back.

He leaned forward and began climbing. Reaching Superior Street he paused to catch his breath, then was reminded that this was the street on which the offices of the *Sugar Beet Review* were located.

He found the building only two blocks to the east; they were on the second floor of a small building which contained a pawn shop on the street floor.

The office consisted of one room. It contained a desk, a steel filing cabinet and a couple of chairs. A discouraged looking man sat behind the desk reading a copy of *The Beehive.*

"Sorry," he said, "I'm not buying a thing today."

"Neither am I," Sargent replied. "You're Mr. Suttles, the publisher of *Sugar Beet Review?* My name is Frank Sargent and I was until recently an employee of Ben O. Chapman."

That was as much as he could get out. The mention of Chapman's name produced the results it usually did. Suttles pushed back his chair, his face darkened and he raised a quivering hand.

"Get the hell out of here!"

Sargent held his ground. "I'm an *ex*-employee of Chapman's."

Suttles relaxed. "Ex? Well, that's better. But I wish it had been Chapman himself who'd stuck his nose in here. I'd have punched his face, then thrown him down the stairs."

"What'd he do to you?"

"He sold me *Sugar Beet Review,* the dirty crook."

"Is that all?"

"All? I've been slowly starving to death ever since I took over the magazine, because Chapman had padded it. It averaged twenty pages of advertising when I bought it. Fifteen of those pages were sold for from five to fifteen dollars a page. I didn't find that out until after I'd paid Chapman five thousand dollars."

Sargent whistled in surprise. "But didn't you investigate before you bought?"

"I thought you knew Chapman, the slimy ghoul. He'd doctored up the books. I sued him, yes, but he stalled and stalled the suit until I couldn't keep it up and accepted five hundred dollars in full settlement. I'd already spent three times that in attorney and court fees. But why should I tell you all of this?"

"Because I came all the way to Duluth to hear it."

"Huh?"

Sargent nodded. "Haven't you been

reading about Chapman in the papers this past week?"

"No. What happened? Did he die? I hope so."

"No such luck. But his partner was murdered. And an ex-editor."

"Yumpin' Yohnny Yohnson! Did Chapman knock them off?"

"The police don't know. But Chapman is definitely one of the suspects."

"And you—I thought you said you were an ex-employee?"

"That's right. I'm also one of the murder suspects. If you've got a few minutes I'd like to tell you about it."

"If it's something bad about Chapman I've got all day."

Sargent seated himself on a rickety chair and gave Suttles a brief resume of *la affaire* Ben Chapman. He wound up by saying, "The simplest thing for me would have been just to put Chapman out of my mind and go back to my old work, but the business got under my skin. Especially the shooting of poor Ernest Pelkey. I'm convinced that he saved my life at the expense of his own and I feel that I ought to bring his murderer to justice."

"But why come up here? Chapman hasn't lived in Duluth in almost seven years."

"Because I believe that whatever's happened in Chicago this past week is somehow tied up with Chapman's past life. I want to see if I can find the thread."

Suttles shook his head. "Then you'll have to look elsewhere. I know nothing about Chapman's personal life. I worked on the newspaper here and one day read a 'Business Opportunities' ad. I had a little money and wanted to strike out on my own. A trade journal sounded interesting to me and I bought it. I didn't buy Chapman's life story with the magazine. I'd never met the man before and haven't seen him since he blew out of Duluth, with my five thousand dollars."

Sargent nodded thoughtfully. "What about his wife?"

Suttles slapped the desk. "Of course! I never met her, but I heard she deserted him. I ran into an old partner of Chapman's once. Fellow named Billingsly. He said Chapman's wife was a smart girl. She was the editor of this sheet for some months—"

"Ruth K. Reese?"

"That's right. Chapman married her, but it didn't take. She walked out on him and went to Hibbing, where she's supposed to be doing all right with an interior decorating business."

"How far is Hibbing from here?"

"About ninety miles."

Sargent scowled. The loop was widening—too much. He didn't like it. He was spending his own money on all this—and had no hope of financial gain in the end.

IT WAS six o'clock when Sargent stepped off the train in Hibbing, famous for having the biggest open iron pit in the world. The dirt in the streets was red and pools of water were stained the same color from the iron ore that provided the steel and iron of the nation.

Sargent went to the Pengilly Hotel, but did not register for a room. Instead, he engaged the clerk in conversation. "I'm looking for an interior decorator," he said. "A young woman named Ruth Reese. Do you know her?"

"No, I don't," was the reply. "There was a shop like that up the street, but it closed up a long time ago. Eight-ten months. The Honyoks who live around here don't go in for that stuff. Their idea of fancy furniture is a davenport that you can fold out and make a bed out of. Mister, the way things are going here now, the boarding houses are renting the beds in shifts. One man jumps out of bed, another hops in. Sheets never get cold. Fine in the winter, but not so good in summer. Was you figuring on renting a room here? 'Cause if you are, I've got to put you in with someone else. Full up."

"I'll see about the room later. I may not be able to stay here overnight. Where was this interior decorating shop?"

"Oh, 'bout half a block up the street. Let's see, Nick's barber shop is there now."

Sargent found the place easily enough, a narrow store in a two-story frame building.

He went in, just as the barber nearest the door was shaking out his cloth.

"Nex', plis," he said.

Sargent needed a shave, anyway, so he seated himself in the chair. As the barber adjusted the cloth over him, he said, "I'm looking for an old friend of mine. Used to have a shop here. Interior decorator."

"Indereyore dekrator? Ha? You meaning bootlegger? We don't got some here no more." The barber chuckled over his joke and brushed the back of Sargent's neck. "You needing haircut. I giving, plis?"

"No, just a shave. The lady who had a store here eighteen months ago — Ruth Reese."

"Oh her! She indereyore dekrator? She don't got the store no more. I gottum. Best bobba shop in Hibbin'." He splashed lather on Sargent's face and began rubbing it in.

The man in the next barber seat half lifted himself from his prone position. "Ruth Reese, Mister?"

Sargent turned his head. "You know her?"

"I did. Best looking girl in Hibbing. Smart business woman, too. Only this wasn't the town for interior decorating. At that, she almost made a go of it. Kind of a mystery girl, Ruth Reese. Wouldn't go out with anyone around here. You couldda knocked me over with a sack of iron ore when this husband of hers turned up."

"Husband? She wasn't married!"

"That's what we thought. Then this fellow popped up and turned out to be her husband. Ruth practically gave her business away and went off with him."

Sargent sighed wearily. "What was his name—Chapman?"

"I don't know. She just said, 'my husband' when she introduced him."

"You met him?"

"Oh sure. Nice looking chap."

"*Nice* looking? Was he young?"

"Yeah; about thirty. A year or two more or less."

"Was he tall or short? Thin?"

"About medium, I'd say. All around. I only met him once and then only to say, 'How are you?' He didn't stay here but a day."

"I thought you said she sold out her business when he came. That must have taken a little while."

"Sure, week or two. But her husband didn't stick around. He was here from Chicago."

Chicago! So the trail was heading back toward the place where it had begun. But Chicago was a big city. A nameless couple could live there a lifetime, undetected. Sargent had to get the name of her husband. *Someone* must know. Ruth Reese must have had some intimate.

"I asked you," the man in the adjoining chair said, "I asked you how come you are interested in Ruth?"

"I knew her years ago," lied Sargent. "A friend of my sister's. She wanted me to look her up. I mean, she wants Ruth's address, so she can write to her. Do you know anyone here in Hibbing who knew her real well?"

"Nope. She didn't mix much with folks here. Her landlady might know."

"Where'd she live?"

"Over on Keewatin Street. Mrs. Druhar's."

Mrs. Druhar's place was a red-stained frame building of two stories. A red-stained sign outside said: *"Rooms."*

MRS. DRUHAR came to the door wiping dishwater from her hands, with a big blue apron. "Good evening, Mrs. Druhar," said Sargent. "I want to ask you

about a girl who used to live here. Miss Ruth Reese."

"Rut'ie?" exclaimed Mrs. Druhar in a guttural accent. "Rut'ie Reese? You are her no-good hosband?"

Sargent groaned. "No, I'm not her husband. I was just going to ask *you* about him."

"I'm doan knowin' him. But he's no-good loafer, I'm hearin'. Don't never send-in' Rut'ie no money. He's comink here one night, going nex' mornin'. Putty soon, Rut'ie she go. Doan knowin' where. Chicago, maybe."

"What was her husband like? I mean, was he young or old?"

"Young; maybe like you. Doan seein' him good. Big bum loafer. Rut'ie, she always payin' rent good. Damfine girl."

Discouraged, Sargent walked back toward the Pengilly Hotel. He'd lost her trail.

He'd learned one thing in Hibbing, that Ruth Reese had remarried. Well, there wasn't any use staying in Hibbing. If there was a train back to Duluth, he'd best be on it.

A block beyond the Pengilly Hotel he saw the railroad tracks. As he approached the depot, he saw an express train turning in and a sudden thought struck him.

He almost ran to the station. The express office in connection was still open and a man with a green vizor over his eyes was checking express shipments.

"Mister," Sargent said, "you're my last hope. I'm an attorney, looking for a woman who's inherited a small amount of money. She used to live here, but moved away without giving her address. It occurred to me that she might have shipped some of her things by express. Miss Ruth Reese."

"Ruth Reese? Say, did she come into money? That's swell!"

"You know her?"

"Of course. She used to have an interior decorating shop here and got a good many things by express. Yeah, I sent her trunks and some boxes to Chicago, when she moved away."

"Chicago!" Sargent exclaimed. "You're sure?"

"Sure, I'm sure."

"What address in Chicago? I'm from there myself. Make it easy to locate her."

"I'll have to look up the exact address. Let's see, that was about a year ago."

"Not quite a year. Eight or ten months."

The express agent went to a series of letter files and scanning them took one down and opened it. He turned to R and skimmed through a sheaf of express receipts. He shook his head and tried another file.

"Yep! Here it is, February 16, 1941. Ruth Reese, Jameson Hotel, Madison Street, Chicago."

"Thanks!" cried Sargent in tremendous relief. "Now, can you tell me when the next train leaves for Duluth?"

"Nine-thirty; get you into Duluth just in time to make the midnight train for Chicago. Bring you in Chicago noon tomorrow."

The connections were perfect. Sargent would be in Chicago forty-four hours after leaving it, after having wandered all around the Iron Range of Minnesota and having learned more about Ben O. Chapman's past than anyone aside from Chapman himself. And in Chicago was Ruth Reese, Chapman's former wife!

THE train got into Chicago ten minutes late, but before twelve-thirty, Sargent was approaching the desk of the Jameson Hotel.

"Miss Ruth Reese," he said.

"Use the house phone, please."

Sargent did and after a moment was told, "Miss Reese is not registered."

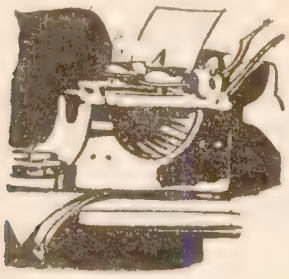
Sargent groaned. Few people remained eight months at a hotel. But they had their mail forwarded. "Did she leave a forwarding address?" he asked.

"Ask at the mail desk."

Sargent went to the mail desk. "Miss

Ruth Reese who was registered here eight months ago; did she leave a forwarding address?"

The girl went to a card file and skimmed



through the cards. After a moment she stopped at one and Sargent inhaled softly.

"Yes," the girl said.

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry, but we're not allowed to give out addresses. Well, I guess this time it's all right. It's Post Office Box 2629."

And that was absolutely the end of the trail. Ruth Reese had deliberately covered it up. You couldn't trace anyone through a post office box. Postal employees never gave out information.

He left the hotel and walked aimlessly up Clark Street. Looking at a restaurant he realized that he was hungry and going inside ordered a sirloin steak. It braced him considerably and coming out of the restaurant he looked southward on Clark. Three minutes walk and he could be at the offices of *Business Journals, Inc.* There was only one person there with whom he would have liked to talk—Jim Robertson.

Grinning crookedly he crossed to a cigar store and entering a booth dialed the number of *Business Journals.*

When Mildred O'Kelly answered, he made his voice sound gruff: "Mr. Robertson, please."

"Just a mo'," cooed Mildred.

Then Jim Robertson's voice said, crispy, "Robertson talking."

"This is Frank Sargent."

"For the love of Seneca!" gasped Robertson. "Where've you been the last two days?"

"Ben fired me; didn't you know?"

"Hell, no! He's been crying for you ever since you walked out the day before yesterday. He acts like you were his best friend. You shouldn't take Ben's firing seriously. If you still want this job—although God knows why — better hustle down here."

"I'm just a couple of blocks away, but first—how do I stand otherwise? The cops."

"Fanning sniffed around here most of yesterday, but he hasn't shown his nose today. You're all right here, except maybe for going down to the inquest. I got a summons yesterday. It's next week."

"I guess I can stand that. I'll see you in a few minutes, Jim."

So Frank Sargent strolled casually into the offices of *Business Journals* some five minutes later. Jim Robertson had evidently tipped off Mildred O'Kelly for she merely nodded pleasantly to him.

He went into his cubicle and found a stack of mail on his desk, all the envelopes slit open neatly.

He sat down and grinned crookedly. Jim Robertson came to the door of his office, winked and placed a finger to his lips, then went off.

A MOMENT later Andy Lawrence popped in. He attempted to be casual, but his theatrical voice could not be hushed.

"Frankie, old man," he boomed, "it's good to see you back."

Ben O. Chapman's office door was jerked open and Ben called, curtly, "Sargent, I want to talk to you."

Sargent drew a deep breath and went into the publisher's office. Chapman had resumed his seat and waved the letter opener.

"A fine time you picked to be temperamental," he whined. "I thought you were one man I could trust. But no, you're like all the others. All in league against me.

And that woman has the skids all greased for me. I can tell. She looks like a cat who's got into an aviary."

Chapman shot a questioning look at Sargent. Evidently he was waiting for an excuse from Sargent, but the latter gave none. So Chapman continued:

"What am I paying you for? What have you done? I mean, what have you found out for me?"

"About what?"

"You know what I mean. Pelkey."

"I found Pelkey for you—"

"The devil with Pelkey! I want that stock certificate he had. His wife's got it, I'll bet. I want you to buy it from her. Pay any price you have to—but get it. I need it by ten o'clock tomorrow morning. Understand?"

"Suppose Mrs. Pelkey hasn't got it? Or won't sell?"

"She's *got* to sell. Offer her five hundred dollars, if necessary. Seven-hundred and fifty if you have to."

"Is that the highest you'll go?"

"No, of course not. I'll lay my cards on the table. If Martha Sligo lays down fifty shares of stock tomorrow and I can produce only forty-nine, I'm out of *Business Journals*. A life-time's hard work gone up in smoke. I want that share of stock. You can offer up to two thousand for it."

"What about the share Hanson Hill had?"

"That woman's got that. She must have it, or she wouldn't act like a cluck who's just hatched out a batch of chicks."

"Are you *sure* she's got it?"

"You know something, Sargent? Speak, man!"

"Hanson Hill told me he sold the stock to someone in this office."

"You said that before—wait a minute, you figure it wasn't Sligo?"

"No."

"Then who?" cried Chapman, hoarsely.

"Hill wouldn't tell."

Chapman started gnawing his fingernails. He shot an apprehensive glance at the telephone, chewed his nails a bit more, then finally reached for the phone.

"Get me Hanson Hill at *Turkey Tracks*," he whined.

Sargent whistled softly, and Chapman gave him an angry look. Then he coughed and spoke into the phone. "Hill, this is Ben O. Chapman." He cringed and Sargent heard the phone crackle. Then Chapman began blustering. "We can settle that some other time, Hill. I want to offer you some money—folding money—a lot of it. Uh—" he cleared his throat painfully. "A hundred dollars. What—"

The phone crackled some more and Chapman grew very red in the face. He listened for a long moment, then whined, "All right, Hill, you've got it off your chest. Now, let *me* talk. I'll buy your rag from you. Yes, I'll give you five hundred dollars— Don't be absurd. Forget that I mentioned it. No, I won't pay a thousand. It isn't worth it. You haven't got anything to sell. Seven-fifty? It's a deal, Hill—on one condition." Chapman looked triumphantly over the phone at Sargent. "That you tell me to whom you sold that share of stock Dan Sligo gave you—What?" The red faded from Chapman's face and his eyes bulged. Then he hung up the phone receiver without another word.

He stared at Frank Sargent.

"I don't understand," he muttered.

"Who was it?"

"Lew Thayer."

"That's who I thought."

"What?"

The phone on Chapman's desk rang and he scooped it up. "What? I wouldn't give you a dime, you low-down thief! Keep your dirty rag and I hope you choke on it."

He slammed down the receiver on the hook. "Never saw such a fool," he snorted.

"Hill?"

"Yes. He thought I was serious when I offered him seven-hundred and fifty dollars for his two-bit turkey paper."

"I'll be damned!" breathed Sargent.

"What's that?" Chapman snapped. "What would a man as stupid as Hanson Hill do with seven-hundred and fifty dollars? Why should I pay him for his paper when he can't keep it going, anyway? This is going to cost me too much as it is—and I can't understand it!"

The phone on Chapman's desk rang again. He waved at it impatiently, then caught it up and snapped, "I'm busy, Mildred! Who?" Ben Chapman suddenly caught his breath, choked and coughed.

"Get out!" he yelled hoarsely at Frank Sargent.

Startled, Sargent went back to his own office. He started opening the *Turkey Talk* mail. Five minutes passed, then Jim Robertson slipped noiselessly into his office.

"Something's up," he whispered. "Chapman's begging for his life on the phone. A woman—named Ruth."

"Ruth!" gasped Sargent. "That's his wife! His ex-wife."

"How do you know?"

"I spent all of yesterday up in Duluth and the Iron Range, checking up on Chapman's past history."

"My God!" Jim Robertson blinked at Sargent, then turned and streaked back to his office, to glue his ear again to the thin panels that separated his office from Chapman's. But he was evidently too late, for Chapman opened his door and called in a quavering voice:

"Sargent!"

SARGENT returned to Chapman's office. His employer was shaking and his face was a pasty grayish-green.

"I've just had a terrible shock, Sargent," he said. "A — a person, the deadliest enemy I've got in the world, just telephoned. I didn't *dream*. She—I mean, he, has Hanson Hill's share of stock. Shhe wants twenty thousand dollars for it. And I've only got until eleven in the morning!"

"So?"

"I haven't got twenty thousand," Chapman moaned. "I'm a ruined man. Thayer, the dirty dog, did this to me. He found my wi—this person—and gave her the stock to get revenge on me. And she'll do it."

"You mean your wife?" Sargent asked, bluntly.

Chapman looked up startled. "How do you know?"

"You've been telling me. *She*. What other woman would you be afraid of?"

"She'll nail me to the cross."

"What'd you do to her?"

"What did *I* do to her?" Chapman groaned. "I picked her out of the gutter—practically. She was only a stenographer, fresh out of school. I made her an editor—married her—and then she walked out on me. I didn't do a thing to her. And she's hated me all these years! She's here in Chicago."

"Where?"

"I don't know. She wouldn't tell. She's going to telephone at eleven in the morning and if I don't give her the money, she'll give the stock to Martha Sligo. I'll be thrown out of my own business. Unless . . ." Chapman caught up his letter opener and pointed it at Sargent.

"Unless I get that stock of Pelkey's. I need that more than ever now. I can get a draw at least, if I have that. Get it, Sargent. What are you waiting for?"

Sargent came forward and placed both of his palms on Chapman's desk. He leaned forward, "Listen, Ben," he said, "Ernest Pelkey lost his life saving mine. I'm going to get the man who killed him."

Chapman gave Sargent a strange look. "All right, go ahead."

"I will. That's why I'm going to do this for you. Because I believe it'll bring out Pelkey's killer."

"What do you mean?" Chapman was startled. "You mean—my wife?"

"I don't think so. But someone she knows."

"Thayer!"

"I don't know. But I'm going to find out. I need some money. Give me a hundred dollars."

"A hundred dollars. You think I'm made of money?" Chapman started whining, then suddenly broke off and whipped out a billfold. He skinned out five twenty-dollar bills. "Get the stock, Sargent. If you save me, I'll give you a raise. A ten-dollar raise. And I'll make you a partner in this business."

"I'll do without the partnership," Sargent said. "There seems to be a bounty on partners in this firm. But I'll get your stock by eleven o'clock tomorrow."

"Before then!" Chapman cried. "I won't be able to sleep a wink. Call me!"

Sargent left and went to the office of the Decker Detective Agency.

WILTING was sprawled on the bench behind the door. Sargent wondered if he had gotten up from it since the other day. Sargent gave him a scornful glance and turned to the red-headed receptionist.

"Is it possible to hire this agency to do some work?"

Wilting stirred and opened up one eye. "'S'all right, now, we ain't working for Chappie anymore. What's it you want?"

"A shadowing job."

"Okey-doke, let's see your money."

Sargent scowled at Wilting. "I'll show it to Decker."

"There isn't any Mr. Decker," the redhead said, sweetly. "Mr. Wilting owns this agency."

Sargent exclaimed. "What? Then why all—?"

"Stall," said Wilting. "Always blame the boss if something goes wrong. Twenty dollars a day for shadowing; night work twenty-five."

"This is a night job—and I want four men shadowed. You can't take care of more than one."

"Sure, got an arrangement with some boys. Get them in a half hour. Who you want shadowed?"

"Some fellows from Chapman's office. Grosvenor Black, Lew Thayer, Jim Robertson and Andy Lawrence."

"You got a hundred dollars to pay for this?"

Sargent pulled out fifty dollars of Chapman's money. "Half now and half tomorrow."

"Deal. Which one you want *me* to shadow?"

"Lew Thayer, but I don't know where he lives—"

"I do. Shadowed him for Chapman. The others I can pick up at the office. Anything special you want to know about them?"

"Everything. Where they live, who they meet, where they go."

"Report where?"

"I'll call here first thing in the morning."

"Right."

Wilting closed his eyes and began to breathe heavily. Sargent slammed out of the office before he lost his temper. Outside he walked slowly toward Lake Street where he climbed to the elevated platform.

SARGENT couldn't have thought of a more distasteful task than calling on Hester Pelkey, but it had to be done. Not so much because of Ben O. Chapman, but because—she might know something that would aid Sargent in bringing to justice the murderer of her husband.

He rang the doorbell of the little white Cape Cod cottage, but there was no response. He tried it again, then knocked on the door. Starting away, he caught a glimpse of a canvas umbrella in the backyard and went toward it.

As he approached he saw Hester Pelkey lying in a canvas chair. She half started up when she saw him but sank back with a sigh of surrender. Her eyes were red and swollen, her face taut and almost colorless.

He said, "Believe me, Mrs. Pelkey, I'm sorry to—"

"All right," she said, listlessly. "What do you want?"

"I want to tell you about Ernest. He tried to save my life. The shots were fired at *me*—"

"What?"

"My back was toward the street, Ernest was facing me. He saw the car and threw himself against me, to shove me out of the way. He did—and was hit, himself. Can you imagine how I feel about that?"

She sat up in the chair, gripping the wooden sides. "But you're Chapman's stooge."

"I'm playing that game because it covers up my real purpose. I'm going to get the person who got Ernest."

"No!" she half-whispered. "Revenge won't bring him back."

"But it'll make what he did worthwhile. Don't you see, Mrs. Pelkey? That's what was the matter with Ernest. He was beaten down by Ben Chapman—and Life—until he felt frustrated and small. To put it bluntly, he'd even thought he was losing you."

"That's not true!"

"Isn't it?"

SHE looked at him in horror, then sank back into the reclining chair. "I was wrong—there was never anyone but Ernest. I know it now and it hurts that I didn't—"

"I know—and will you help me justify Ernest?"

"Yes! Yes, I will. Perhaps—perhaps he'll know. What do you want?"

Sargent wanted to ask her who the man had been, but she was too hurt already. He asked, instead: "What did Ernest do with that share of stock he got from Chapman?"

Hester Pelkey's forehead became a series of little furrows. "But I don't know, Mr. Sargent. Really, I don't. Ernest had that share of stock until he was let out by Chapman. Then he became furious. He said he was going to use it to ruin Chapman. He came in one day with a thousand dollars in cash and said he'd done it. That was two days before Mr. Sligo—"

"Do you suppose he sold the stock to Sligo?"

"I thought so at the time. Even after Sligo was killed, I thought so. I thought Chapman had done it, to get the stock. And Ernest said that same thing."

"I don't think Chapman killed Sligo," Sargent said. "I know—he's every kind of a villain, but he didn't have the nerve for that. I don't *think* so. Tell me, was Ernest friendly with Lew Thayer?"

"Of course. But . . ."

"Thayer bought the share from Hanson Hill, for twenty-five dollars and today it turned up in the hands of the former Mrs. Ben Chapman."

"Who?" cried Hester Pelkey.

"Ruth Reese, who was once married to Ben Chapman."

"There *is* such a person, then? Ernest said that was the one thing about which Chapman would never talk."

"She telephoned him today. And she told him a few things. When I left the office, Ben had his fingernails chewed down to his wrists and was still going strong. His ex-wife had the Indian sign on him."

"Good! I hope she squeezes him for all he's worth."

"It looks like she will. She says if Ben doesn't give her twenty thousand for that stock by eleven tomorrow, she's going to give it to Mrs. Sligo."

The full import of that didn't strike Hester Pelkey for a moment, but when it it, she gasped. "So if he doesn't get the other share he'll be outvoted by Mrs. Sligo's stock!"

"That's right. Fifty to forty-nine, in which case Mrs. Sligo chucks Ben out of the business. If he can get the other share he can win a draw. He'll have Mrs. Sligo around, but he'll still be on deck himself."

"Then," said Hester Pelkey, firmly, "I hope he doesn't find the other share."

"Actually, you don't mean that."

"Yes, I do."

"No, you don't."

Her chin quivered a little and she had to press her lips together tightly before she could control them. Then she said lightly. "All right, perhaps not. But I was thinking . . . hasn't Mrs. Sligo got Ernest's share now? Didn't Ernest sell it to Sligo?"

"If he did, it was stolen when Sligo was killed. Unless—"

"No. No, it wasn't Ernest. *I* know that."

"I hope you're right. And I think you are. I'll be going."

"Good-by, Mr. Sargent!"

WHEN he got off the elevated at North Avenue and Larrabee, Sargent telephoned the offices of *Business Journals*. The publisher sounded ill when Sargent got him on the phone.

"Bad news," Sargent told him. "I talked to Mrs. Pelkey and I'm sure she hasn't got the stock."

"Ohmigawd!" groaned Chapman. "Then I'm a ruined man. Mrs. Sligo has it and it'll cost me twenty thousand to even get a draw—if Ruth doesn't doublecross me."

"I thought you said you didn't have twenty thousand?"

"I might barely make it if I mortgage everything I own. Even my masks! Sargent, I'd counted on you and you've let me down."

"*I* didn't let you down. Stop crying. There's still a little hope."

When Sargent reached the Ajax Hotel, Jim Robertson was sitting on the stairs, just inside the front door.

"There you are!" he cried. "I figured you'd be home any minute. I've been dying all afternoon to hear the dirt and then you ran out on me."

"Chapman chased me out," Sargent said.

"I know; I hear—through the wall. His Ex has put the screws on him and he's bleeding. But I want to hear about Minnesota. What'd you learn there?"

"Have you had dinner? Well, let's grab a bite and I'll tell you about it."

They turned the corner on Halsted and entered a Hungarian restaurant where they both ordered *Wiener schnitzels*. After giving their orders, Sargent related the story of his trip to Minnesota. Robertson listened, fascinated, until Sargent mentioned the name of Ben Chapman's former wife. Then he exclaimed:

"The same Ruth Reese who's making Ben squawk right now?"

"The same, but I think Ruth's current husband may have something to do with that."

"Well, who is he?"

"Unfortunately, I don't know. No one in Hibbing knew. A couple of people had met him, but could barely describe him. And Ruth used her maiden name in forwarding her things to Chicago."

"Hey! You got that on her?"

"Her trunks were shipped to the Jameson Hotel, here in Chicago. And there the trail ended up against a stone wall."

"She'd moved?"

"She'd moved. She left her forwarding address—Postoffice Box 2629. That was eight months ago."

Jim Robertson frowned. "You say, Ben's ex-wife has been in Chicago eight months?"

"Yes . . . and she has a share of stock in *Business Journals*. The share Ben needs. She wants twenty thousand for it by eleven tomorrow morning or else she's going to give it to Martha Sligo."

"Wait a minute. Let me get this straight. There's *two* shares floating around. Ernie's and Hanson Hill's. Which is which?"

"You mean which one has Ruth Reese got now?"

"Yes."

"That's the big question. You know the original setup?"

"Pretty well; I got it from Ernie. Ben was up against the wall a year ago and had to get some outside capital. Sligo came in, but insisted on a fifty-fifty partnership. You have to have at least three stock-

holders for a corporation and neither wanted to break the fifty-fifty rule — so they cooked up a scheme whereby each gave up one share—and issued it to an employee. Ben gave his to Ernie—rather he put him down on the books as owning the share, but wouldn't actually let him hold the stock."

"And Ernie, feeling he was entitled to it, helped himself. Sligo bought Ernie's share, but if he bought it, *why was he killed?*"

"Eh?"

"Sligo had been double-crossed by the hill-billy, Hanson Hill, but now he had Ernie's stock and had Chapman by the throat."

"Yeah," said Robertson, thoughtfully. "But how'd Hill's share get to Ben's Ex?"

"Didn't you hear Ben on the telephone this afternoon? He was bleating like a stuck pig."

"You mean when he called up Hanson Hill? Why—why, Hill told him that he'd sold that stock to Lew Thayer. I did hear Thayer's name mentioned. Say, you suppose—"

"I don't know. Thayer may have sold it to Ruth Reese. On the other hand, Daniel Sligo was murdered."

"And it wasn't Ben? I've had him sized for it all along."

"If he's acting now, he's the world's greatest actor. But he may be at that. He may be doing all this crying to cover up . . . and tomorrow he'll pop up with Ernie's share of stock and everything will be all right again with Ben O. Chapman & Company."

Robertson shook his head. "No, he's *scared*. His Ex gave him the fright of his life. Unless . . . d'you suppose Ben owes her a barrel of alimony?"

"I gathered that she walked out on him. Besides, she's remarried. Do they allow alimony if a woman remarries?"

"Sometimes they do, I've heard. I wouldn't know, never even having taken the plunge once. I can't figure it out!"

They had been eating while talking and now finished, smoked for a few moments in silence. Then, Robertson said, shaking his head:

"Suppose Ben's ex-wife has *both* the missing shares of stock?"

"I thought of that," Sargent replied. "If she has, she got one of them from the person who murdered Daniel Sligo."

ROBERTSON exclaimed softly, "D'you suppose a *woman* could have used that pair of scissors?"

"It's possible, they were thin and very sharp. But—the woman I traced all through Minnesota never wielded that pair of shears. Unless I got the wrong picture of her. She might be fooled by a man, but she's no murderess. If she was, she'd have killed Ben eight years ago, instead of walking out on him."

"You said she was just a kid, then. She's older now. Bucked the world by herself. The world's a tough place."

"I've been around. Ringing doorbells is no picnic." He laughed, shortly. "Well, what now, Jim? A movie? I didn't sleep too well on the train last night."

"Okay; maybe we can find a double feature and both get a good nap."

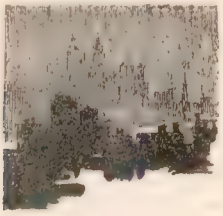
They left the restaurant and turned the corner on North Avenue. Then Robertson brushed against Sargent and said out of the corner of his mouth, "Don't look right away, but we're being followed. A little guy in a brown suit."

Sargent started to inhale sharply, then remembered. He'd hired Wilting to have all the Chapman editors shadowed this evening and the detective had undoubtedly picked up Robertson at the office. But he didn't want to tell Robertson, so he whispered back, "Is it the same detective who followed us the other day?"

"No, a new one. I noticed this one in the restaurant straining his ears to listen to us. I figured him for a buttinsky; but he's after us. I'd like to give him a poke in the nose, just for fun."

They passed Larrabee Street and crossed the street. The shadow followed behind them. Past Sedgwick they finally found a theatre with a couple of pictures neither had seen. Sitting in the darkened orchestra, Robertson said, "When we leave here, let's split up suddenly and see which one of us he follows."

It was ten o'clock when they came out of the theatre. The little man in the brown suit was dawdling in the lobby, pretending to be looking at the stills of next week's bill. Jim Robertson whispered, "See you tomorrow," then, loudly, "Well, Frank, suppose we go and have a bite to eat now? There's a good restaurant over on Clark Street and—"



They stepped out of the theatre and Roberston whirled to the left, heading for Clark Street. The shadow went after Robertson.

SARGENT walked to Sedgwick and stepped into a taxi.

"Fullerton and Clark," he said.

Ten minutes later he stepped out of the taxi a block from Ben Chapman's apartment house. When he reached the entrance a man stepped out of the shadows.

"Mr. Sargent!"

"Wilting!" exclaimed Sargent, "what the devil are you doing here?"

"Working for you."

"But I thought that you were going to shadow Lew Thayer?"

"Uh-huh, he's upstairs."

Sargent went into the apartment house and climbed the stairs to the second floor. Reaching the door of Chapman's apartment he listened for a moment. Voices were rumbling inside, but he couldn't make out any words. He leaned against the door buzzer.

The rumbling inside stopped. Chapman's voice called, querulously, "Who is it?"

"Frank Sargent."

He heard Chapman exclaim before the door was opened. Through a haze of cigarette smoke, Sargent looked in upon a scene that was not very different from the one he had seen here on his previous visit. There were eight or ten people in the living room.

"Sargent," Chapman cried. "Lew Thayer's here. He's making trouble. Maybe you can talk to him,"

Sargent followed Chapman in to the party. A couple were making violent love in one corner and several guests were seated on the floor. There was a vacant spot in the circle, which Ben O. Chapman had evidently occupied.

From the kitchen came a crash and Ben Chapman, muttering under his breath, headed in that direction. Sargent was close upon his heels.

In the kitchen, Lew Thayer was breaking up Ben O. Chapman's glasses and chinaware.

Sargent threw both arms about Thayer, pinning his arms to his side. All of this seemed like old stuff.

"Le'go me," snarled Thayer.

"You're fired, Thayer!" whined Ben Chapman. "I've put up with you too long. Not another publisher would take what I've taken."

Sargent's patience snapped. "Shut up, Chapman!" he cried.

Surprisingly, Sargent's flareup got results. Chapman gave him a shocked glance and tripped out to the living room.

Sargent released Lew Thayer.

"Now, you and I are going to have a talk," he said, grimly.

Thayer stared at him. "Say, you're the new man on *Turkey Talk*. Fella who took Ernie Pelkey's place."

"Yes!" snapped Sargent. "I'm also the man whose life was saved by Ernest Pelkey at the cost of his own."

Thayer winced. "Jeez, that was tough. That's why I been hittin' the bottle. Ernie and me was pals."

"A pal of Ernie's killed him. Maybe it was you."

A deep crimson darkened Thayer's already red face. "Look here, Sargent, I don't take that from any man."

"You'll take it and like it!" Sargent snarled. "If you're the one who killed Pelkey you'll take even more. If you didn't do it, you can stay sober long enough to help me get the man who did. Can you understand that?"

Thayer swallowed hard. "You mean that? You're on Pelkey's side? I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought. I've taken Chapman's guff, because it furthered my investigation."

"You're a cop!" accused Thayer.

"I am *not!* I told you why I was doing this. Now listen for a minute. You bought a share of stock from *Business Journals* from Hanson Hill some time ago."

"Who, me?"

"You! Don't lie, because Hill admitted it. You gave him twenty-five dollars for it."

Thayer seemed to deflate a little. "All right, I thought it would be a joke on Ben Chapman. I was going to use it to keep him in line. Then Ernie—"

"Yes?"

"He wanted it from me."

"When was this?"

"Last week, after Chapman fired him."

Sargent looked steadily at Lew Thayer. "And you gave it to him?"

"Well, Ernie promised that I'd get the twelve hundred Ben owed me."

"So Ernest Pelkey had the *two* shares of stock. I don't get it; I have it on good authority that he sold one of those shares to Daniel Sligo for a thousand dollars."

Lew Thayer's eyes suddenly evaded Sargent's. The latter crowded closer to Lew Thayer and took hold of an arm. "This is important, Lew. Damned important. Did you know Ernie sold that single share to Dan Sligo?"

THAYER hesitated a moment, then shrugged in surrender. "Yeah, sure. After all, Ben chucked Ernie out without even a week's notice. Ernie was a married man and besides, he was kinda sick. I didn't see anything wrong with him selling that share for a grand, especially since—"

"Since he still had the other share? I see. He sold one share to Sligo for a thousand dollars, knowing full well that Sligo with an apparent majority would crowd Ben and then Ben, to protect himself would have to pay Ernest whatever the latter asked for the other share—which would give him no more than a draw with Sligo."

Thayer scowled. "What's wrong about that? If you knew Chapman as well as the rest of us—"

"I've gotten to know him pretty well. Whatever you think of Chapman I think twice as hard. But if what you're telling me is true—then Ernie Pelkey killed Dan Sligo."

Thayer's eyes fell again.

Sargent continued, "Sligo must have suspected that he was being razzle-dazzled and went for Ernie."

"All right," said Thayer. "I figured that out a long time ago. But it was self-defense, see. Sligo made a pass at Ernie and Ernie grabbed up the scissors and let him have it."

"No," said Sargent. "Sligo was killed in his own office. But he was killed with Chapman's *shears*. The murderer *brought* them into Sligo's office. He didn't just grab them up in self-defense. It was premeditated."

Thayer stared at Sargent, goggle-eyed. "Say that again!"

Sargent repeated it, adding, "And Pel-

key didn't commit suicide. *That* was murder."

"What are you driving at?" Thayer asked, hoarsely.

"What I've been aiming at, right from the start. I want to get the murderer of Ernest Pelkey and Daniel Sligo. Because I'm still convinced that it was the same person."

"It couldn't have been!"

"Why not?"

"Because—because—" Thayer started floundering and Sargent stepped into the breach.

"I know some things you don't, Thayer. Maybe. I know that an entirely different person popped up today with one of those two shares of stock that Ernest Pelkey had. Ben Chapman's ex-wife!"

"What?" cried Thayer, almost staggering from the astonishing information.

Sargent left him in the kitchen, then. If Thayer had told the truth he was no longer important in the case. If he had lied about selling that share of stock to Ernest Pelkey he was too cognizant of his own guilt to spill anything to Sargent.

In the living room, Ben O. Chapman was sitting on the floor, entertaining his guests with anecdotes of his successful business career.

"Ben," he said, "have you got a phone here?"

"In the bedroom. I'll show you."

"Never mind."

Sargent crossed the room and entered Ben Chapman's bedroom. The walls were hung with fifty or sixty hideous masks. There was also a bicycle exerciser and a small shelf of books. Sargent, curious as to Ben's taste in literature, scanned the titles. *Forty Years, Forty Millions, The Life of Frank A. Munsey* stood between Boccacio's *Decameron* and *The Life of Fanny Hill*. Further along the shelf were: *Business Depressions, Past and Present, Mein Kampf* and *Horatio Alger*, by Herbert C. Mayes.

The telephone was under the stand and Sargent looked up the number listed for Daniel Sligo. Then he dialed it. It was some time before Martha Sligo's hoarse voice snapped: "Hello!"

"Listen," said Sargent, in a hushed bass, "you're having a stockholders' meeting tomorrow with Ben Chapman, aren't you?"

There was a slight pause, then Martha Sligo said: "What of it? Who is this?"

"You don't know me," said Sargent, "but I can do you a favor. A mighty big favor."

"Is this . . . who are you?" Martha Sligo demanded, querulously. "I won't talk to you unless you tell me who you are."

"Then you won't talk—and you'll be sorry!" Sargent put the receiver on the hook.

He waited approximately two minutes, then dialed the number again. "Do you want to talk?" he asked, when Martha Sligo answered.

"Yes! That is, if you're the right person."

"Eh?" Sargent snarled. "Somebody else been calling you up? Then deal with them—if they've got it."

"Wait!" wailed Martha Sligo. "Wait a minute—please!"

Sargent hung up. Then he stared at the phone.

It was true, Martha Sligo had been offered *Business Journals* stock and she was willing to buy it. That meant Ben Chapman was licked—unless Sargent could find Ruth Reese before eleven in the morning.

BUT did he want to find her before that time? He didn't care if Ben Chapman lost control of *Business Journals*. It would serve the man right to suffer a crushing business and financial defeat after all the careers he had ruined in his time.

Except—that would be a victory for "X," the murderer.

Sargent became aware of a persistent tapping on the bedroom door. He went to it and shot the bolt. Ben Chapman crowded in, closing the door behind him.

"What is it, Sargent? What did you learn?"

"I learned," said Sargent, deliberately, "that you're going to take one awful beating tomorrow. . . ."

Chapman wailed. "Everybody's against me. You've let me down worst of all. You're—"

"—Fired," said Sargent. "And *you'll* be fired tomorrow, unless I get a lucky break in the morning. . . ."

Chapman's eagerness created by the meager hope thrown to him was almost pathetic. "There's a chance, Sargent? Oh, good! You'll do it, Sargent, I know you will. I'll raise your salary. . . ."

"Ah, hell! Now pull yourself together and answer a couple of straight questions. Without any nonsense. First, why are you throwing a party here, tonight of all times?"

"Because I was afraid to be alone. There's safety with people around you. I told you I had been threatened. . . ."

"*Who* threatened you?"

Chapman blinked. "Why . . . why, Daniel was murdered, then Pelkey—"

"But *who* threatened you?"

"Why, no one exactly, but I can sense it. They're going to get me."

For the second time within the half hour Sargent lost his patience. "Stand still, you fool! I mean, keep that rattlebrain of yours still for a minute."

"You can't talk to me like that," Chapman whimpered. "You're just like all the others—"

SARGENT caught his employer by the front of his shirt. "I said, *stand still!* Now, answer this question: Why were you having Daniel Sligo shadowed before his death?"

Chapman's eyes rolled wildly. "How do you know that?"

Sargent shook him violently. "I'm asking the questions. Why did you have Sligo shadowed?"

"Because I was afraid he'd go to Pelkey after I'd discharged Pelkey. I knew Pelkey had that share of stock—"

"Then why did you fire Pelkey?"

"Because he was a raving maniac! What could I do? He assaulted me fearfully, right in my own office—"

"Why?"

"No reason at all. I couldn't understand—"

"Why?" insisted Sargent.

"I don't know. Well—he accused me of trying to steal his wife from him—"

"*You* were that man!" gasped Sargent. "I—I'd thought that was Jim Robertson."

"Robertson? Has he been shining up to Hester Pelkey?"

"No, you fool. I said I'd thought he was the man. And it was *you*. Why the devil didn't you tell me this at the start?"

"What difference does it make?"

"None—now! But I'd have known why Pelkey had such a hatred for you. It would have explained Pelkey."

"But it didn't really amount to much," Chapman whined. "Hester—I mean Mrs. Pelkey—used to come down to the office to see her husband and sometimes he wouldn't be there. I—I took her to lunch a couple of times."

"And filled her with your wealth and power and success. And all the time her husband was working for you for a measly forty dollars a week—"

"Forty-five!"

Sargent pushed Chapman away from him. "Tomorrow's Saturday, Chapman," he said. "If you're still controlling *Business Journals* you can fire me at noon; if you're out, I'll quit to spare Mrs. Sligo from firing me. Until then—"

He walked out on Chapman. Heading through the living room he shot a quick glance around and failed to see Lew Thayer. Reaching the street he looked for Wilting the detective, but he was gone. So he assumed that Thayer had left and Wilting was on his trail.

It was after midnight when he reached his room at the Ajax Hotel that he

hadn't occupied for three nights. There was a letter under his door.

He winced when he saw the return address: *Trotter Institute of Public Opinion.* The letter read:

Dear Sargent:

I have just learned from the papers the reason why we have not been receiving our usual quota of reports. It seems that you have left our fold and strayed into more *active* fields. Yet we have not received your resignation. Are you attempting to devote the major portion of your time to mayhem and violence, intending to give us such few moments as you may be able to spare some Thursday evening?

Important issues are at stake in this country and now, more than ever, the public must be informed. I had been keeping my eye on you and was on the verge of summoning you to the home office and putting you in charge of our Public Relations Department. But now, alas, I must seek elsewhere among our field workers. And I must, also, appoint a new man in your territory. For that reason I shall be in Chicago on Saturday, next, at which time I hope to see you and receive the return of your credentials and whatever supplies you still have on hand. Until then,

Regretfully yours,
HORACE TROTTER

Sargent tossed the letter into the wastebasket. "Nuts to you, Horace," he said, "you're the man picked Willkie to beat Roosevelt!"

SARGENT was at the door of the Decker Detective Agency at nine in the morning, but it was nine-thirty before Wilting and his secretary came along. Without preamble Sargent snapped, "Wilting, is it possible to get an address from the post office department? Someone who's got a box?"

"Well, it's possible," said Wilting, "but it's pretty tough. Who's the person whose address you want?"

"Ruth K. Reese—"

Wilting chuckled. "You won't have to go to the post office." He pulled four cards from his pocket and shuffled them. "Yeah, here it is. 1299 N. State. Lew Thayer went to see her after he left Chapman's."

"Thayer went to see Ruth Reese?" Sargent cried. "I don't believe it."

"*I* followed Thayer and he went straight from Chapman's to this Reese dame—without even stopping at any saloon on the way. He was inside for almost an hour."

Sargent snatched the cards. "Come on," he snapped. "I need you." As they hurried out of the building he scanned the first card. It read:

5:30, took up post outside Barney's Tavern.
8:55, subject came out.
8:59, subject went into Jake's Place on Halsted
9:14, subject came out of Jake's Place.
9:29, subject went into Golden Glow Café on Webster and Cleveland.
9:52, subject came out of Golden Glow Café.
10:03, subject entered apartment house on Clark Street.
11:10, subject came out of apartment house.
11:33, subject entered apartment at 1299 N. State. Name Ruth Reese on mail box.
12:20, subject came out of apartment on State.
12:40, subject entered Barney's Tavern. Apparently went to bed."

Sargent had to stop reading as they left the lobby of the building, but outside he hailed a cab and, piling in, gestured to Wilting. Wilting followed and said to the driver, "1299 North State and step on it!"

Sargent looked at the second card:

5:00, subject left office and went to Ajax Hotel, North Ave., near Halsted.
5:25, subject met man coming in and they went to restaurant on Halsted. Had *Weiner schnitzels* for supper.
6:15, subject came out of restaurant with other man.
6:35, subject entered Plaza Theatre with other man.
10:02, subject came out of Plaza Theater, separated from other party.
10:12, subject went into rooming house at Dearborn and Division. Did not come out again.

"This is Robertson," said Sargent, tapping the card. "I was the other man with him. Now which of these remaining cards is which?"

"The one with the little 'B' in the corner is Grosvenor Black, the one with the 'L' is Andrew Lawrence. But here's our address—"

It was ten minutes to ten.

TWELVE NINETY-NINE was an ancient three-story brick building, jammed in between two taller apartments. There was a tiny vestibule, off which a staircase ran to the second and third floors and a short hall led to the entrance of the first floor apartment.

Wilting gestured to the mail boxes. There it was for anyone to see—anyone who picked this building from a million others in the city. Ruth Reese, a card said under the first mailbox. That indicated her apartment was on the first floor.

Wilting opened the inner door and they started down the short hall to the door. When they were six feet from it the door was opened and a woman stepped out. She wore a tailored suit of red and brown plaid, the brown color predominating. It was set off by a matching hat of the same material. Gloves were on her hands and a purse under her arm. She was a pretty blonde and almost as beautiful as Hester Pelkey.

Her eyes showed some apprehension as they advanced toward her. "Miss Reese?" Sargent asked, knowing very well that it was she.

She looked from Sargent to Wilting. "I was just going out," she murmured.

"My name is Frank Sargent," Sargent said. He nodded to the door she had been about to lock. "Do you mind?"

She hesitated an instant, then turned and led the way into the apartment. It was a cheap, shabbily furnished place. "Will you excuse me a minute?" Ruth Reese asked, starting for a bedroom.

Wilting headed her off and Sargent said, "Do you mind? No telephone calls. This man is a . . . detective!"

She turned, looked at Sargent, then seated herself in an overstuffed chair that needed re-upholstering. She kept her purse in her lap.

"I've been up in Minnesota," Sargent began.

She nodded.

"You've heard? I thought so. Do you mind giving me your purse?"

"I do mind—decidedly!"

Wilting walked over deliberately and snatched it from her lap. He threw it to Sargent, who unsnapped it. Inside was a folded paper of stiff parchment stock. He took it out and unfolded it. It was a share of stock in *Business Journals, Inc.* He folded it again, then looked at the back side of it, on which were written, in ink, two indorsements transferring the stock. He stared steadily at one of the names.

He said to Ruth Reese, "This is it, you know."

"Ben Chapman robbed me of eight thousand dollars," Ruth Reese said, evenly. "I loaned it to him before we were married. He never gave it back. Ben Chapman is just about the lowest man on this earth."

"In spades," said Sargent. "I won't argue with you on that point. But murder is murder—"

He could see her lips tighten into a thin line. "Chapman would do *anything.*"

"No, not murder. He's too much of a coward for that."

Her nostrils were flaring now. "That's not true. Chapman—"

Sargent shook his head, insistently.

For a moment they looked at each other in silence, then Ruth Reese said in a hushed voice, "It's not true."

"I'm afraid it is. And I think you know it."

"No—!" she cried. "No—I don't know it."

"He told you Chapman?"

"Yes, of course. It *was* Ben Chapman, the slimy—" She broke off and her beautiful eyes darted about wildly. "You're lying!"

He looked at her silently until she broke and covered her face with her gloved hands.

He nodded to Wilting. The detective followed Sargent to the door where the latter whispered:

"I may have trouble; can you dig up a heavy-set foreign-looking woman? Her name is Mrs. Druhar and she keeps a rooming house in Hibbing, Minnesota. I'll put my hand on the man's shoulder and she's to say, 'That's the man!' He only saw her once and won't remember."

"Etta'll dig up someone. My wife's awful good at that."

"The redhead's your wife?"

"Oh, sure. What time you want her?"

"Eleven sharp. And you stay here until then. Understand?" He made an almost inperceptible gesture toward Ruth Reese.

Wilting nodded and Sargent went out. He walked to Division Street and hailed a cab.

IT WAS twenty minutes to eleven when he entered the offices of *Business Journals, Inc.* Ben Chapman was pacing the corridor between the rows of cubicles. Beyond, in her late husband's office, Mrs. Sligo sat with her arms folded over generous breasts. Mr. Koppis, her handle-bar mustached attorney, was in the office with her.

"Sargent!" Chapman screamed. "Where have you been? I've been waiting for you for hours—" He searched Sargent's face and alarm spread over his own.

"Come into my office," he moaned.

Andy Lawrence, Jim Robertson and Grosvenor Black were all in their own cubby-holes. They knew that fireworks were on the program for this morning and it wasn't the Fourth of July.

Chapman closed the door behind Sargent with elaborate caution, then caught him by the coat lapel. "Don't keep me in suspense, Sargent—"

"I won't. I failed—"

"Ohmygawd!"

Sargent looked at his watch. "It's fifteen minutes to eleven. She'll be telephoning you shortly. You've got the money—?"

"I could only get eighteen thousand," Chapman whined. "I even gave my stock to the bank for security and I couldn't get the entire twenty thousand. If she refuses the eighteen thousand I'm lost. Did you see the look on Mrs. Sligo's face?"

"Yes," said Sargent. "She's got the other share of stock. I wonder how much she paid for it?"

"I thought you said Sligo had bought it before—"

"I was wrong. The killer sold it to Mrs. Sligo this morning—"

"*This morning.* How do you know?"

"I talked to her on the telephone last night; from your apartment. I pretended I had the other share and got enough out of her to know that she was pretty much on edge. She didn't have the stock at that time. But she's got it now—"

"Why didn't you tell me?" Chapman said, peevishly. "I might have been able to buy it myself. Martha Sligo didn't have anywhere near even eighteen thousand—"

"You'd really pay eighteen thousand to keep control of this business?"

"Of course. *Creep & Crawl* is making

a thousand an issue, *The Slot Machine* is making more than that. *Turkey Talk's* going to come out all right now and *The Skating Rink*—well, I've got a prospective buyer lined up for it."

"You're sure you'd pay her the eighteen thousand?" Sargent repeated. "You would not try to back down at the last moment, like you did yesterday with Hill."

"What can I do?" Chapman asked, miserably. "She's got me across a barrel. It's—it's five minutes to eleven. She's not going to call—"

"Give me eleven thousand, three hundred and sixty dollars, Chapman," Sargent said.

Chapman started to wave him away, then stopped. "What?"

"That's eight thousand dollars with six percent interest, for seven years. Not even compound interest."

Chapman's eyes threatened to pop from his head and he began licking his lips. "Eight thousand—"

"Eleven thousand, three hundred and sixty dollars. Count it out, Chapman—and I'll give you your stock!"

He took a quick step to the door of Chapman's office and called out: "Don't anyone leave, please!"

THERE was sudden activity in the offices. Editors began to pop out of their cubicles. Even Mildred O'Kelly left her switchboard. And Mrs. Sligo, her eyes flashing triumphantly, came out of her office.

"What's all this commotion about? This is a business office, I'll have you understand. I'll fire the lot of you. And don't you think I can't do it, either."

Sargent ignored her. "Is it a deal, Chapman?"

"Let's see the stock!"

Sargent took the certificate from his pocket, but kept it folded. "Count out the money, Ben."

"Where did you get that?" Mrs. Sligo shrilled. "I'll have you understand. . . ."

"Poo!" said Sargent. "You can fight that out with Ben Chapman later. . . ."

"Yes," said Chapman. "Here's the

money, Sargent— Give me the certificate—"

"Mildred," said Sargent, "take this money and get a taxicab. Go up to 1299 N. State and hand this money to Ruth Reese, or shall I say, Mrs.—Jim Robertson!"

"Jim Robertson's face was gray. He said, "Not me, Sargent; you got the wrong steer."

"Robertson," squealed Ben O. Chapman. "What does he mean? Are you—Ruth's husband?"

"I never saw her in my life." Robertson grinned frostily at Sargent.

The latter shrugged. "You live about a block from her. Coincidence, maybe. But it made it handy for you to run over—"

"But why should he want to deny he's married to Ruth?" demanded Ben Chapman. "Ruth is one of the most beautiful women I ever met—"

"That's very generous of you, Ben," said Sargent, sarcastically. "But the reason Jim doesn't want to admit he's Ruth's husband is because that would make him a murderer—a two-time murderer!"

A HUSH fell upon the group, broken by Robertson himself. "You've played detective long enough, Sargent, but I'm fed up. I'm getting to hell out of here and I'd like to see anyone stop me."

But Sargent was blocking his passage, through the narrow corridor. "If you can

prove you didn't kill either Sligo or Pelkey I'll be the first to let you go. . . ."

"So will *I*," said Lieutenant Fanning, stepping into the offices of *Business Journals*.

Jim Robertson looked as if he was ready to be sick. "It's a frameup!" he cried.

"Go ahead, Sargent," Fanning invited. "Maybe I'm wrong. If so, I'm willing to admit it. I had Thayer picked myself."

"Thayer knew," said Sargent. "So did Ernest Pelkey. And if Thayer hadn't been blind drunk for practically all of the last three days he would probably be among those dead. Thayer and Pelkey started it. Between them they got the two missing shares of *Business Journals* stock. Pelkey sold one share to Sligo—or thought he did—for a thousand dollars. That gave Sligo control. Pelkey knew that Ben Chapman would pay almost any price to retain his fifty-fifty control. That was the whole plot. There was only one hitch in it. Pelkey being sick and virtually delirious at times, couldn't do the negotiating with Sligo. So Robertson, the third member of the trio, offered to do it. He gave Pelkey one thousand dollars and told him that he had sold the stock to Sligo. Actually, he hadn't—"

"Five thousand I paid him this morning!" spat Mrs. Sligo.

"You lie like hell," snarled Robertson. "You got that share from your husband and you know it. You can't prove a damn thing."

"You gave him cash, Mrs. Sligo?" Sargent asked.

"He wouldn't have it no other way. And at seven o'clock this morning he came to my house. Of course, there wasn't no witnesses, but I gave him the money. *I* know I did."

"Search me," jeered Robertson. "I'll split with you if you find five thousand on me."

Sargent nodded. "You wouldn't be foolish enough to have it on you. As I was saying, Robertson only told Pelkey and Thayer that he'd sold the stock. But Pelkey had to call Sligo. . . . He was already bordering on *dementia praecox* and suspicious of everyone. Sligo accused Robertson—asked him to come back after working hours, so Chapman wouldn't hear what it was about. You know what happened to Sligo."

"You didn't find my fingerprints on the scissors," Robertson sneered.

"You're not that dumb. In fact, Robertson, you're very smart. You almost convinced me, with your protestations of friendship for poor Ernest Pelkey. You did convince Lew Thayer. Or maybe Thayer was too pickled to understand—"

He stopped and drew a deep breath. "Then you opened the letter Ernest Pelkey wrote me and took a couple of shots at me—or did you intend to shoot Pelkey?"

"You," said Robertson. "I shot you with my little bow and arrow." He turned to Lieutenant Fanning. "You traced the car to me? Pfft! I never owned a car in my life."

Lieutenant Fanning looked worriedly at Sargent. "You haven't given any real proof yet, Sargent—"

SARGENT looked at his watch. It was one minute after eleven. "Why, yes," he said. "I *have* got some proof. A witness who will identify Robertson as the husband of Ruth Reese—the husband who roamed all about the country, working on newspapers here, loafing there— The witness, Jim," he tapped Robertson lightly on the shoulder, "is Mrs. Druhar, who was your wife's landlady up in Minnesota. I sent for her yesterday—" He turned suddenly to the door. "Here she is! Mrs. Druhar, we want you to point out the man you knew as Ruth Reese's husband. Will you do that?"

"Mrs. Druhar" was a stout, middle-aged woman on the slatternly side. She waddled forward, looked at Sargent, then turned her eyes upon Robertson. "Dot is de man," she said, "de no-good loafer!"

Then Robertson broke. "Oh, what's the use? If Ruth sold me out—" He laughed

harshly, "And here comes Looney Lew, the boozer—"

Lew Thayer it was; eyes bloodshot and wild. He wobbled in, like a sailor in 'Frisco, on the fourth day of his three-day leave.

"Ben, you louse!" he shouted. "I been thinkin' it over. I ain't gonna waste money suin' you. I'm gonna get satisfaction like this, see!"

Whack!

BEN O. CHAPMAN went down. It was an anti-climax to the tense scene that had just been enacted. Chapman relaxed and watched Lieutenant Fanning put handcuffs on Jim Robertson. Then he followed the detective and the retiring editor of *The Skating Rink* to the door.

"Thanks, Jim," he said, "for helping me with the editorial stuff."

Robertson grinned wryly—and cockily. "You repaid me, pal," he said, holding up his manacled wrists.

The elevator came to the floor and a portly, gray-haired man stepped out. "Is this the office of *Business Jour—?*" he began, then stopped. "Sargent! I've just come from your hotel and what a mouse-trap it turned out to be. I don't approve of Trotter field men living in such *slum* places."

"Hello, Mr. Trotter," said Sargent. "How are you?"

"Disappointed," said Horace Trotter. "Disappointed in you. I'd had hopes for you. I was going to make you Director of Public Relations for the Institute—"

"Press agent, you mean?"

"Well, yes. Actually, I was going to have you get out a house organ. A fine, illustrated magazine of say about twenty-four pages—"

"Grab it, Sargent," said Jim Robertson, stepping into the waiting elevator with Lieutenant Fanning. "Grab it—and good luck."

Sargent waited until the elevator door had closed, then turned back to Horace Trotter. "If that job's still open—I'll take it."

"Good!" cried Trotter. "That's why I came here, to try to persuade you to accept it. But what about your editorial job here?"

"Wait here!" said Sargent. "I'm going to resign right now."

Grimly he entered the offices of *Business Journals, Incorporated,* walked down the narrow corridor between the cubicles and pushed open Ben O. Chapman's door.

Chapman stopped pacing his rug. "You, Sargent," he snapped. "I was just thinking. That wasn't very loyal of you, making me pay all that money. So you're fi—"

"I quit!" cried Sargent, beating him to it. "And here's my resignation!"

Whack!

He didn't wait to see if Chapman went down. He heard the thump and that was enough for him. He walked out of Chapman's office, to Horace Trotter, who would take him to New York, a city he'd always wanted to see.

It was far from Chicago—and perhaps Hester Pelky could be persuaded to come there.

He thought she could be persuaded.

COLUMBUS TOOK A CHANCE

By BRUCE DOUGLAS

Author of "The Wind Passeth Over," etc.

MARTHA TODD leaned firmly back against the leather cushions and strove to control the quickened beating of her heart. After the wearying, jolting ride along the twisting trail through the badlands, the valley lay ahead. Hidden Valley. In another half hour they would be in Oasis! And Dave would be there to meet her—her Dave, holding his arms out to her, smiling his infectious smile, proudly displaying the deputy-sheriff's badge on his vest.

She was the only passenger in the old seven-passenger touring car which made the stage run through to Oasis. The driver had been talkative at first; but soon he had his hands full keeping the car on the dangerous ups and downs and switchbacks of the trail through the badlands; and they had ridden in silence.

Martha was glad of the silence. She

had plenty to think about, plenty of happy plans to make for the future. For the twentieth time she unfolded the yellow telegraph blank and read:

DARLING, LUCK HAS FINALLY TURNED. CAPTURED STAGE ROBBER. THOUSAND DOLLARS REWARD. ANOTHER THOUSAND WHEN WE SWEAT LOCATION OF LOOT OUT OF PRISONER. NO REASON TO WAIT LONGER. I WANT TO SPEND MY LIFE MAKING YOU HAPPY. WILL YOU TAKE THE GAMBLE? COLUMBUS TOOK A CHANCE. COME MARRY ME IN OASIS.

DAVE.

As it had every time she read it, the telegram renewed within her a feeling of uneasy apprehension. It struggled with the warm glow of love and anticipation; and she had a hard time thrusting it from her. The message was so like Dave, so completely like him. Through the words she could see him, effervescent, loving, irresponsible, gay, wholly appealing. But three phrases, damningly characteristic of Dave, rose up out of that telegram to make her fear:

LUCK HAS FINALLY TURNED. WILL YOU TAKE THE GAMBLE? COLUMBUS TOOK A CHANCE.

Luck — gamble — chance. She stared down at the words, fear in her eyes. Would Dave change? Would he settle down, under the responsibilities of marriage? Or would all of their future be passed in a bitter insecurity caused by his gambling urge?

Twice when Dave had saved up almost enough for them to make their start—to buy the little spread they had picked out—he had lost it in gambling. His becoming a deputy sheriff in Hidden Valley had been a gamble, too. He had taken the job because it held out the chance of winning fat rewards for the capture of criminals. This time he had won out. Would it make a confirmed gambler out of him? Or would he take his winnings and settle down after their marriage?

Upon the answer to that question depended the whole of her future happiness, and she knew it. Dave *must* be cured of gambling. If he was not, then nothing but misery lay ahead for both of them.

The stage was rolling along a level, dusty road, entering a town of weathered, unpainted houses and false-fronted stores. Martha's heart beat so fast she could feel it in her throat. She folded the telegram and thrust it into her purse. The driver brought the car to a stop in front of a store marked "General Merchandise." Martha leaned forward, scanning the group in front of the store, looking for Dave.

"Oasis," said the driver, and hopped out, opened the rear door, and dragged out her suitcase.

Martha stepped slowly out, and stood on the boardwalk under the wooden awning, the light of anticipation slowing dying in her brown eyes. Dave was not there. Three men stood on the sidewalk; four others lounged about the entrance to the store, leaning idly against the wooden wall. But Dave was not there.

She scanned them more closely, fear arising in her. Five were cowboys, apparently in town for a day off. The sixth was a townsman. Probably both the storekeeper and agent for the express company. Martha's eyes lightened as she took in the seventh man. He was tall and grizzled, with a lined, leathery face and sun-faded blue eyes. On his vest shone a badge which said "Sheriff."

She moved over toward him, her face alight. "Did—did Dave ask you to meet me?" she asked. "Is he away on some—some mission?"

The sheriff's grizzled brows rose. Martha explained. "I mean Dave Sherman, your deputy. I'm Martha Todd. Dave sent for me. We're to be married. I suppose something prevented him from meeting me, but—"

Her voice trailed off. There was no sign of lightening in the sheriff's expression. It seemed sterner and more forbidding than ever.

"Dave sent for you?" he repeated.

Martha produced her telegram. The sheriff read it, folded it, and handed it back. His faded blue eyes were inscrutable.

"Yes, Miss, something prevented him from meetin' you," he said gravely. "I wish you'd come over to my office with me, over yonder in the jail. I want to talk with you."

FEAR built a cold fire at the pit of her stomach. What had happened? What had prevented Dave from meeting her? Why was this grizzled old sheriff so cold and grim and distant? Why had he looked surprised at her arrival? Surely Dave had told all about her, and about his sending for her.

The sheriff waited at the door of the jail office for her to enter, then followed and set down her suitcase. He motioned to a chair, and moved around his desk and sat down. Martha eyed him questioningly. The sheriff laid both arms on his desk and leaned forward. His lined face was grave and sad, and there was the hint of suspicion in his blue eyes.

"Is this the only message Dave sent you, Miss? Are you shore?"

"Why—why, yes," Martha stammered. "Should there have been another?"

There was doubt in the sheriff's eyes. His rugged shoulders went up and down in a small gesture.

"I reckon he sent this when he thought he'd got away with it," he mused. "Miss Todd, I've got bad news for you. Heavy news. Dave didn't capture the stage robber. He *was* the stage robber. I've got him in a cell here now, charged with the crime."

"No!" Martha came to her feet, one hand clutching at her throat. "It isn't true! It can't be!"

The sheriff's gnarled hand rested gently on her shoulder, urging her down into her seat. He shook his head unhappily. "It's true, all right. Better you should know it now than later. Dave captured a man, all right, an' brought him in. But later he helped him break jail. They was in cahoots. Then Dave made the mistake of spendin' some of the stolen money, an' we got him. Dave didn't know the bank in the State Capitol had sent in the numbers of those bills."

Martha gasped. "It's—impossible! Dave must have had some explanation."

The sheriff nodded. "Yeah, he had an explanation, all right. Said he won the bill from the prisoner playin' black jack. He spent it at the Busy Bee Restaurant, an' we picked it up there. But that don't explain how the prisoner happened to dig the bars loose from his cell window with Dave's jack-knife."

He lifted a hand to stop Martha's quick objection, then leveled a bony finger across the desk. "Dave says that Kruger—that's the prisoner—stole the knife from him while they was playin' black jack. But no jury in the world is goin' to believe him. Here's what happened; an' you might as well face it—Dave an' this Kruger cooked up that stage robbery. Dave brought this Kruger in, so's to clear himself of any suspicion, an' so he could claim the reward. Then he helped Kruger escape. Later, when things had quieted down, they was to meet out in the badlands somewhere an' split the loot. But Dave had some of the stolen money; an' he made the mistake of spendin' a stolen bill in the restaurant."

Anger rose slowly in Martha, reddening her cheeks. "It isn't true!" she exclaimed. "It can't be! If this man Kruger is supposed to be in this with Dave, why aren't you out trailing him down?"

The sheriff turned the palms of both hands upward. "That's the joker in the whole thing. That's what made it look so safe to Dave. It's plumb impossible to trail a man down, once he's disappeared into these badlands. Findin' a needle in a haystack is nothin' to it. No, the money's gone, an' Kruger's gone; but we've got Dave."

Martha came to her feet. "You've done nothing!" she accused. "Nothing to help

clear Dave. And you're doing nothing! All right, if the sheriff of this county won't do his duty and go after Kruger, we'll see if a woman can't go round him up!"

"Impossible," the sheriff grunted. "Can't be done."

"Columbus took a chance!" Martha flung the words at him. "Now I'll take one! Where is Dave's horse? I want it."

The sheriff came to his feet. "You can't do that! It's plumb crazy."

"Not as crazy as your believing Dave the kind of person to go back on his oath as deputy and commit a robbery! Now you listen to me. Since the only way to clear Dave is to bring in this Kruger, I'm going to bring him in! All I want is Dave's horse, and the direction Kruger rode in when he escaped."

"He rode south." The sheriff said the words almost instinctively, then clamped his lips shut. His faded blue eyes held Martha's brown ones for a long moment. He shook his head slowly.

"You can't do it," he said. "Listen to what it would mean. First off, you'd be ridin' into a badlands where one sheriff an' three deputies have rode an' never come back. It's a country where you'd never know you'd caught up with a criminal until he had a bead on your back an' was pullin' trigger."

He stopped her interruption by leaning over his desk and looking down at her. "Look at what you'd have to do. If you just bring Kruger back, it won't do no good. Him an' Dave will be tried together. If you bring Kruger *an'* the loot, it'll help some to get Dave a shorter sentence; but it won't clear him. If you figger on *clearin'* Dave, you'd have to bring back Kruger, *an'* th' loot, *an'* on top o' that *a full confession signed by Kruger clearin' Dave o' complicity.*"

He picked up a pipe from his desk and stuffed it with tobacco. "Unless you got *all* them things, you'd do better not to come back at all. A jury would hold that it was impossible for you to find Kruger at all, lessen you was in cahoots with him an' Dave both an' knew where to find him; so you'd be liable to be accused an' tried along with 'em. I'll be frank an' say I'm inclined to figger it thataway myself."

Martha stared coldly into his eyes. "What you think," she said icily, "doesn't interest me. Where is Dave's horse?"

"You can't have Dave's horse." The sheriff spoke with finality. "First place, you've got no right to the animal. Second place, I ain't goin' to let no woman ride alone up into them hills."

Matha's mind raced. There was only one thing to do, and she had decided upon doing it. Though she had no ghost of an idea how she was to find the stage robber, nor how she was to capture him if she found him. But find him she must! Dave was innocent; he must be cleared.

The stubborn sheriff would never agree to letting her take Dave's horse; she could see that. Her glance moved out to the street—and an idea came to her. Lowering her glance in apparent submission, she moved toward the door.

"I—I'll be back in a minute," she hesitated. "I want to send a telegram. Will you tell Dave I said Columbus took a chance? And that I'll see him later?"

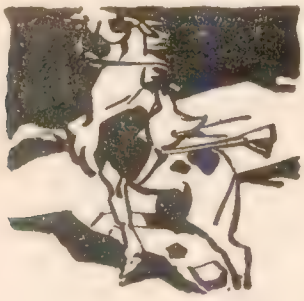
She stepped out into the glaring sunlight and moved down the boardwalk. In front of the Longhorn Saloon several saddled horses stood at the pole hitchrack. Quietly she loosed a wiry-looking pinto and mounted.

A yell went up, and she faintly heard the words "Horse thief!" as she spurred the horse to a gallop, heading south.

BY THE time darkness fell Martha was deep in the maze of canyons, hills, and gullies which constituted the badlands. And she knew by this time that the sheriff had told the truth. It was impossible to trail anyone and find him once he had got into these badlands. In this welter of cliffs and canyons there must be hundreds of places where a fugitive could hide. Hun-

dreds of places where he could see without being seen. Hundreds of gullies and little open valleys where a pursuer was at the mercy of the pursued—where a sheriff could be shot down without even glimpsing his killer.

Martha had selected the pinto horse partly because he looked strong and wiry, partly because he was a cowboy's horse and hence had a pack behind the saddle. The pack yielded bedding, a little cold food, and matches. Martha built a fire, with no



effort at concealment, and sat beside it as darkness deepened. The chill of night was not the only cold she felt. The icy hand of despair was clutching at her heart as she pondered the hopelessness of the task she had undertaken.

Even the first of the things she had to do was impossible of achievement. She could not trail Kruger down and find him. Failing that, she could not go on and do those other things. She counted them over in her mind despairingly. Four things. Each one increasingly impossible for a helpless, unarmed woman to do. First, to find Kruger. Second, having found him, to capture him. How, she wondered, could a woman like herself hope to overcome and capture a desperate armed outlaw? Third, if she achieved the impossible and captured him, to make him lead her to where the loot was hid. And fourth, to force him to sign a confession which would clear Dave of suspicion.

She stared bleakly into the darkness. At the edge of the circle of light her horse stirred, slowly cropping the frosty grass. Beyond, darker shadows looming in the darkness denoted the craggy granite hills which hemmed in the little valley. And as she stared, the loneliness and helplessness of her position pounded in upon her. Four things to achieve—all of them impossible.

She dropped her head down on the trunk of a fallen tree and sobbed.

But presently she remembered a story her mother had told her about a bundle of twigs that could not be broken until the bundle was untied and the twigs broken separately. She sat up, determination flowing through her. She would, she decided, attack her problems one at a time.

The first problem was to find Kruger. Yet there was no way in which she could trail him down. She joined the two facts in her mind—and came out with an idea! Getting up, she piled more of the firewood she had gathered onto the fire. The twigs blazed first, in a bright flurry of sparks, then the larger branches and logs—until the fire was big and bright, with flames leaping high into the air. The circle of light moved outward until the grazing horse was no longer in shadow and the light reached almost to the steep valley slopes.

She sat back and waited, smiling a little as she thought of what Dave would say if he could only see her. She was doing it backward, she thought with grim amusement. To trail a man, you keep hidden, make little fires, or none at all, never let yourself be seen. But she had made a big fire and was sitting close to it, clearly visible from any of those dark slopes enclosing the valley.

An hour passed. And another. Twice Martha got up, replenished the fire generously, and sat down again. And then, finally—it worked!

A voice came from the darkness behind her, gruff and commanding. "Set right thar. Don't move, or I'll blast yuh!"

A chill spidered up and down Martha's spine. She stiffened and sat quietly, mak-

ing no effort to turn and look. Another command came, this time from nearer.

"Lift yore hands!"

She obeyed, putting her hands shoulder-high and visible in the light. A hoarse gasp followed.

"Damn if it ain't a woman!"

The man moved slowly around in front of her, the black muzzle of his gun winking at her in the firelight. When he spoke, the man's voice was filled with a blend of suspicion and curiosity. "What you doin' here? Who are yuh? Where'd yuh get that horse?"

She chose to answer the last of the three questions. "I stole him," she announced. "Where'd you think I'd get a horse like that?"

She looked up at him, smiling jauntily. He was a big, heavy-set man with black eyes and a growth of black beard. And as she looked those black eyes widened and glowed with the beginnings of wild thoughts and hot and lawless impulses. Martha flinched inwardly, but forced the provoking smile to remain on her face.

"On the dodge?" the man demanded suspiciously.

Martha nodded. "Sure, I'm on the dodge. Why would I be out here in this god-forsaken country by myself at night if I wasn't on the dodge? You're Kruger, aren't you? You don't live out here because you like it, do you?"

She ended with a fairly credible laugh as the man started and stared more closely at her.

"How did you know my name?" he demanded, his voice filled with suddenly increased suspicion.

Martha dropped her hands and shrugged her shoulders. "Word passes," she remarked calmly, "along the grapevine telegraph. You know how it is."

The calm statement seemed to quiet his suspicions. "What are you on the dodge for?" he asked.

Martha stood up. She shivered visibly. "I'm cold," she said, ignoring the question. "I stay cold, no matter how high I build this fire!"

Kruger took a step forward, and his tone became roughly caressing. "Why not come an' share my cabin?" he suggested insinuatingly. "It's dry an' warm."

Martha shrugged. "Sure. Why not?" she said. "I'm hungry. Got anything to eat in your cabin?"

"Plenty!" Kruger's voice was hearty. He holstered his gun and hastily began rolling up her pack and saddling her horse.

Martha was trembling inwardly, and she was filled with disgust at the uncouth bandit; but she kept her voice calm. "It'll be sort of homey, having a woman cook a meal for you, won't it, Big Boy?"

The cabin was not far away. After she had mounted and Kruger had brought his own horse out of the darkness, they reached the cabin in less than half an hour. Kruger jumped down and lifted his arms to help her dismount. He held her longer than was necessary; and she felt smothered with his big arms around her—but she gave no sign of her distaste.

SHE entered the cabin without hesitation when he set her down, and moved immediately over to the stove and began rummaging in the cupboard nearby.

Kruger growled suddenly, "What yuh doin'?"

She drew back. "Looking for something to cook," she snapped back. "What did you think I was doing? Quit snapping at me like that!"

But her heart was beating wildly within her; for in a far corner of the cupboard she had glimpsed the canvas sacks of the express company! Kruger had brought her to the loot she could never have found.

She strove mightily to quell her inner trembling. Acting with outer casualness, she took a skillet and placed it on the stove. She put coffee and water in the pot and set it beside the skillet. Then she removed the skillet from the stove and held it in her hand. She pointed upward to a high

shelf, and exerted all the power of her will to keep her voice casual.

"I want that little stew-pan, Big Boy," she said. "It's too high up for me to reach."

Unsuspectingly, the burly bandit crossed the room and stood in front of the shelf. His back was turned to Martha as he stretched his arm upward.

Martha swung the skillet with all her force. The narrow side of the pan caught Kruger just behind the ear. He grunted, and the air wheezed slowly out of his lungs as he collapsed limply at her feet.

IT WAS a strange cavalcade which rode into Oasis shortly before noon the next day. First, a scowling bandit, swathed in rope and with his feet tied together beneath the belly of his horse. Second, a very determined young woman, holding a large, black-muzzled six-gun trained on the bandit's back. And finally, led by a rope tied to Martha's saddle-horn, another horse bearing two large canvas bags with the name of the express company printed on their bulging sides.

A crowd began to gather as they rode through town toward the jail. Someone yelled, "That's my horse that was stole!" And someone else shouted, "Hold it! Let's wait an' see what this is all about!" Men helped Martha dismount; and others untied the bandit's feet, pulled him from his horse, and hustled him into the jail office.

Martha waited until other men had unloaded the money bags and brought them in. Then she stepped in and faced the sheriff across his desk. The onlookers ranged themselves excitedly along the walls.

Martha produced a piece of paper and laid it before the sheriff. "There's your signed confession you said you needed," she declared. "And here's your loot and your bandit." She turned to face Kruger directly.

"This is your signature, isn't it, Kruger?" she demanded briskly. "And the statements you signed your name to are all true?"

Kruger appeared to be still dazed at the rapid turn of fortune against him. He nodded stupidly. "Shore," he admitted. "I done it. No use tryin' to lie out of it now."

Martha breathed a sigh of relief. She explained to the sheriff. "A law court might call that paper a statement taken under duress; but it'll stick now he's acknowledged it before witnesses. Now suppose you let Dave out so he can hear the rest of this."

The grizzled old sheriff lifted the paper silently from his desk, read it, and silently laid it down again. He lifted a bunch of keys from a hook beside his desk, selected one, and handed it over to one of the waiting crowd.

"Let Dave out, Joe," he said mildly. "It looks like we been doin' him a wrong."

THE man went through a rear door into the cell room, presently emerging with Dave Sherman. Dave exclaimed, "Martha!" in a choked voice; and she flew into his outstretched arms.

After a long moment, the sheriff cleared his throat. "If you two don't mind," he suggested, "we'd like to hear how all this happened."

Martha pushed Dave gently away, and turned, beaming. Carefully, beginning at the very start, she told the story of what had happened. The stolen horse. The long ride until dark. Her despair. The campfire. The idea, and the bigger campfire. Kruger's coming—and the rest of it. The room was dead silent as she spoke, everyone hanging onto her words with breathless amazement. Finally, she concluded, and smiled triumphantly at the sheriff.

"So you see," she explained, "because I couldn't find Kruger, I made him find me. And because I couldn't find the loot, I made him lead me to it. It was as simple as that."

Someone in the crowd drawled with broad irony, "Yeah—simple!"

The sheriff put in a question. "But the confession?"

Martha smiled. "It was the same principle," she explained, "of making use of the impossible. Remember that it was impossible to find Kruger's cabin. When I had him tied up, and he came to, I pointed out that if I left him tied up in it, it might be a hundred years before anybody ever found the cabin. He signed."

A gasp went up. The sheriff shook his head wonderingly. "But you wouldn't have gone off and left him to die."

"Well—Kruger would have gone away and left an enemy tied up to die. And since such an act was possible for him, he believed it was possible for me. So the bluff worked."

All through her explaining, Martha had been casting little side glances at Dave. Hopeful glances. Hopeful and fearful. Now that she had finished, Dave burst into sudden speech.

"But, damn it all, Martha, look at the chance you took! It was an awful gamble, putting yourself into the power of that bandit an' lettin' him take you to his cabin! Why, what if—"

A beaming smile spread over Martha's face. She turned squarely toward Dave. "Columbus took a chance," she quoted airily.

Dave spluttered and waved his arms. "Yeah!" he grated. "Columbus took a chance, an' what finally happened to him? He died broke, an' in prison! There'll be no more takin' chances from now on, Martha, you hear me?"

A great weight seemed to lift itself from Martha and fall away from her, and she felt light and airy and ethereally happy. By her own unaided efforts she had freed Dave from suspicion, reinstated him in the respect of his fellowmen. But that alone would not have assured their future happiness—hers and Dave's. She saw again in her mind's eye those three words in the telegram: *luck—gamble—chance.*

And now —it was almost incredible— *Dave* was lecturing *her* against gambling!

It seemed unbelievably funny. She burst into musical laughter as she moved toward him, pillowed her head against his shoulder.

"Yes," she murmured dutifully, her words muffled in the rough texture of his coat. "Yes, Dave, darling! I agree. No more gambling. For either of us. Except the one big gamble that we're going to win. The gamble for married happiness!"

If They Didn't Want an S O S Sent Out, They Sure Got the Wrong Guy as Operator!

ARMS CARGO

By PATRICK O'KEEFFE

Author of "Prize Ship," etc.

STANDING in the cockpit of the launch speeding him toward the small freighter, Eldredge regarded her with moody disfavor. Her side was streaked with rust, seaweed waved from her waterline, a ragged Central American flag drooped from her staff. Tethered to an anchor in the lower bay, less than twenty-four hours before she became a front-page sensation, the *Lorenzo* suggested a hulk that had been resurrected from the harbor bed and revived with a shot of steam.

A brown-skinned sailor hauled up Eldredge's bulky suitcase on a heaving-line as he climbed the rickety pilot ladder. His five feet ten dropped lightly from the forward bulwark to the well deck, where he came under the immediate scrutiny of a paunchy man, bristly haired and wearing steel-rimmed glasses. The eyes behind them were like chips of cold amber. He was not in uniform.

"The new radio operator?" he challenged, in an accent that sounded Spanish though he looked German.

Eldredge nodded, but the other wasn't satisfied.

"Your papers, if you pliss."

After examining Eldredge's radio license, several discharges, and the letter of assignment, the man said, "The secon' mate will open up the radio cabin for you. I will sign you on in a leetle while."

He was evidently the captain. He walked away. Eldredge's blue eyes switched to the second mate, a young man standing to one side, a wide grin of welcome on his thin face.

"Grasser!" exclaimed Eldredge, suddenly recognizing a former shipmate. "I didn't know you at first with that Gable mustache you've sprouted."

They gripped hands. "I spotted you soon's the boat left the landing," chuckled Grasser. "Couldn't mistake that big blond nut of yours and the mouthful of ivories."

Eldredge grinned. He jerked his head after the retiring captain. "What's he think he is—a Gestapo agent?"

"Just the opposite. He figured you might be one. He's scared of sabotage."

Grasser did not enlarge upon this remark until they were chatting in the radio cabin amid cigarette smoke, Eldredge perched on the high bunk, Grasser astride a camp stool.

"We'll be hauling up the hook any minute now. We've been anchored nearly forty-eight hours, waiting for the weather

outside to moderate, though it ain't been what you could call rough. But Cap'n Wieghardt didn't seem to want to risk going out in it. I guess he'll hug the coast all the way down."

"Couldn't blame him, in this old kettle," grunted Eldredge.

Grasser shrugged. "I guess it's because he's been ashore so long. He's harbor master down in Puerto Benevides. Used to command one o' the Republic's coasters. He was born in that country of German parents, he told me. It seems the Government's modernizing its army in line with Pan-American defense talks, and it bought a pile of arms and supplies up here, contracted for them before the British began to get priority. He was sent up to charter a ship for the load.

"With shipping scarce, he was glad enough to take this one off a scrap heap. She nearly scuppers under with rifles, machine-guns, ammunition. He's scared the Nazis might try to sabotage her. They have a grudge against him because he wouldn't line up with them in Central America.

"That's why he looked you over. He's taking no chances on getting any heinies aboard. The chief mate and the chief engineer are Spaniards, the steward's Italian, but all three of 'em hate the Nazis' guts. The third mate, you, myself, and the assistant engineers are Americans. The crew—Filipinos, Cubans, Porto Ricans."

"The usual set-up for a Latin-American flagship," said Eldredge. "Not my first by a long shot."

"She's my first," murmured Grasser ruefully. "I was glad of the job, even though it's only for one trip to Benevides and back with coffee. I've been pounding the beach ever since the Mediterranean was closed more or less. I didn't expect to find an old-time passenger-ship man like you here."

Eldredge flicked his cigarette in disgust. "I was the only man around when the first operator assigned here was put ashore sick this morning. It was near noon when word came through, and, it being Saturday, the boys had quit the static room early to go to the ball game. I happened to be parked right in the superintendent's office, getting a load of bad news—"

The door opened, and a dark unshaven man wearing an unfamiliar cap badge looked in. At the same moment the engine room telegraphs jangled.

"Stan' by to get under way," said the newcomer to Grasser.

Grasser rose. "The chief mate," he said to Eldredge, by way of introduction.

The chief mate scrutinized Eldredge with suspicious, sloe-like eyes.

"Always lock the door when you go out, an' lock eet at night when you turn in," he warned. "There ees danger of sabotage."

With all the precautions, thought Eldredge, they were not too sure about the crew. After the two mates had left, he looked over his quarters. He was not impressed. The radio cabin was a ramshackle wooden house set on the port side aft of the bridge deck; the operating room was little more than a cubby hole with two ports overlooking the sea; the door opened onto a small, dingy sleeping-room, which had the only entrance from the deck.

Eldredge didn't have a chance to finish his chat with Grasser that day or evening. He turned in about eleven, remembering to lock the door. With the *Lorenzo* wheezing through a smooth sea, he quickly fell into a sound sleep. He was roused from it by someone hammering on the door. He groped for the light switch, but snapped it without effect. He could feel that the ship was stopped, and was listing to starboard. Springing from his bunk, he unlocked the door. Grasser stood outside with a flashlight.

"Send out S. O. S. Cap'n's orders. He had something to be scared about after all. She started to list soon after I came on watch at midnight. The cap'n was awake.

He got the mate out to sound the holds. Then rushed off for the chief engineer. Next thing, he was on the bridge yelling 'Sabotage' and 'Abandon ship' like a wild man. I got it she was filling up—scuttled."

THE second mate thrust a slip of paper into Eldredge's hand. "That's our position. He didn't hug the coast after all—took a wide sweep out to sea. To avoid the traffic. Nervous as a pup because it was his first trip in ages."

"But the pumps?" said Eldredge.

"Chief says the connections are all balled up, and he and his men ain't been aboard long enough to get to know 'em. Then someone threw the lights outa joint. Chief's as panicky as the Old Man." Grasser turned to go, sighing, "First job in months and it slips from under me first night out."

"It's a swell break for me," cried Eldredge jubilantly.

He closed the door, and in the operating room he switched on a small light tapped from the emergency battery. He dropped into the chair by the desk, picking up the headphones. He turned on the receiver tubes.

When they had heated up, a hiss sounded in the headphones, but code signals were absent.

Eldredge changed over to the auxiliary receiving antenna, and instantly the high-pitched note of a nearby ship rattled the diaphragms. Evidently there was something at fault in the main antenna circuit. Eldredge quickly verified this by starting the little generator under the desk humming and then pressing the sending key. The antenna meter showed no response.

He rose impatiently. Trouble had to crop up at a time like this! Before he could begin tracing it, the outer door flew open, and Captain Wieghardt burst in.

"Abandon ship," he cried excitedly. "She go down quick."

"I haven't got the S. O. S. off yet, Cap'n. Something wrong with the set—"

"Sabotage! But do not mind. Go to your boat before it ees too late."

"But, Cap'n, it can't be deliberate. There's been no one in here except me, and I've kept the door locked. It's probably only a simple fault which won't take long to—"

"There ees not time, I tell you. We do not need the S. O. S. We are near the land and traffic lanes. Rockets will bring help. I do not want you to reesk your life."

"But—"

"Obey my orders."

The captain snatched up Grasser's position slip as he spoke. His voice shook, and his eyes rolled behind his steel-rimmed glasses. He was in a panic, all right, Eldredge decided. It would be useless to try to argue with him.

"Just my tough luck!" he groaned.

The captain seemed bewildered by his remark, but Eldredge did not explain. He shut off the generator from habit, and went into his sleeping cabin. He hurriedly pulled on trousers and a jacket, grabbed up his wallet and papers from a drawer, and stepped out into the cool gentle breeze. The captain followed and shut the door.

ELDREDGE went along the dark slanting deck toward the starboard boat. Sailors were excitedly grappling with it in the beam of a flashlight played about by the chief mate. On the other side of the deck, Grasser was yelling at the men struggling with the port boat to cut out the panic. He was getting no help from the chief engineer or the mate. They were clamoring for the boats to be swung out before it was too late.

Eldredge had once been on a tanker during a collision; the antenna had snapped, and she foundered before a spare one could be rigged for the distress call. But there had been no wild scramble for the boats such as this. The *Lorenzo* had a list, and she was down by the head; but she didn't seem ready to go yet. Even if the chief engineer and the captain were panicky because they couldn't prevent her from being scuttled, they ought to see that she wasn't sinking like a brick. The captain had even forgotten the rockets, by the look of things.

Eldredge worked his way across the deck to Grasser, who was darting about, trying to keep order. Eldredge managed to get his attention.

"How long do you think it'll be before she goes under?" he shouted above the din.

"Christmas!" bawled Grasser. "That's how it looks to me, but the cap'n says—"

"I know. He chased me out of the radio shack before I had time to get the S. O. S. off. I'm going back. Keep your boat standing by to take me off, eh?"

"You don't have to fool around with the S. O. S. We're close to the Jersey shore. And the cap'n says to start for it soon as—"

"Grasser, I've got to go back," said Eldredge urgently. He began to speak rapidly, for Grasser's attention was torn between him and the boat. "You remember I was telling you yesterday about being in the radio superintendent's office getting a load of bad news? It's this—a shore inspector's job'll be open soon. I'm slated for it. Another guy named Bulger's after it. We're both crazy about the same girl. Susie's a swell kid, only—"

Grasser guffawed: "You want to make a hero of yourself so she'll—"

"Nuts! Let me finish. Susie wants her man ashore—no running off to sea. Now, the president of the radio company has a new idea for a broadcast program—dramatizing true S. O. S. calls. He needs an operator who's sent one in his time to help him get the stories from others. The superintendent wanted me to have the job, but had to rule me out when I told him I'd never sent one.

"That guy Bulger'll get the job. He's slick-tongued. He'll ease himself into the big-shot's favor and land the inspector's job and Susie with it. If I could send out just one S. O. S., the superintendent would—"

Grasser suddenly dashed away as someone yelled that the after fall had jammed. Eldredge groaned. He couldn't afford to lose any more time. He'd have to take a chance on Grasser holding the boat for him.

Eldredge groped across the deck. Someone had mounted the engine-room skylight and was playing a flashlight on the men piling into the starboard boat and urging them to hurry. It was Captain Wieghardt.

ELDREDGE stopped. The captain was sure to spot him if he tried to slip past toward the radio cabin. There was another route. Eldredge stole forward and down the ladder to the well deck. He darted into the starboard alleyway. It was like a tunnel, reverberating to the trampling feet above. Eldredge hurried past the engineers' empty cabins and came out on the after well.

He climbed the ladder back to the bridge deck. The starboard boat was now in the water, but one or two figures still showed in the beam of the captain's flashlight, waiting to slide down the lifelines.

Eldredge crossed to the radio cabin. As he came up by its side, a dangling wire brushed against his head. Instantly he knew what it was—the antenna lead-in! He felt for the insulator, fitted in the cabin side. The nut was on the end of the threaded bolt.

This was the antenna trouble: The lead-in had been deliberately disconnected. Eldredge couldn't see what had been gained by it, unless the scuttlers had intended to delay the distress call, and hence lessen the possibility that some nearby

salvage tug might reach the ship before she went down.

He quickly connected the wire again, tightening the nut with his fingers. He then hastened to the door. There seemed no further need for caution. The deck was now in darkness. He could hear the voices from the starboard boat, among them the captain's, shouting for the lugsail to be hoisted.

As far as Eldredge could tell by the feel of the sloping deck, the ship hadn't listed another degree or sunk another inch. Christmas was right!

The emergency light was still burning in the operating room. Eldredge started the little generator humming once more. He pressed the key. He was elated to see the radiation meter pointer move up the scale. It wouldn't take long now to get off the S. O. S.

At that moment someone entered from the deck and came to a dead stop in the doorway of the operating room. It was a young man, blond and under-sized. He stared in consternation at Eldredge. Eldredge looked up at him blankly. He had never seen him before, felt sure he didn't belong to the ship. He rose instinctively to demand who he was. The other took alarm. He turned and fled, his feet pounding the deck.

ELDREDGE was mystified. Suddenly the engines began to clank, the *Lorenzo* shaking to their movement. Eldredge rushed to the outer door in amazement. He could see nothing in the darkness, but he could hear the sea swishing past as the ship slowly gathered way. He had a fleeting mental vision of a stupefied second mate seeing the ship churn away from his boat.

A rush of feet along the deck alarmed Eldredge into slamming the door and turning the key. The men halted outside. Someone wrenched at the knob; then thumped furiously. An enraged unshaven face peered through the thick glass of the nearest port. It was the mate's. Behind him was the chief engineer.

The chief mate's voice came through faintly. "The door—open eet or we cut your throat."

Eldredge was dumbfounded. There was little doubt now that he had unwittingly blundered into some well-laid scheme to seize the ship, and might pay for it with his life. His throat was likely to be cut whether or not he opened the door.

But he wasn't altogether helpless. One way to counter the threat was to show that it would be folly to carry it out. Eldredge hurried back to the operating desk. He began to tap out S. O. S.

A destroyer on neutrality patrol promptly answered. She sounded hearteningly close. She requested the nature of the distress and the *Lorenzo's* position. Eldredge looked for the slip of paper that Grasser had brought; then remembered that the captain had taken it.

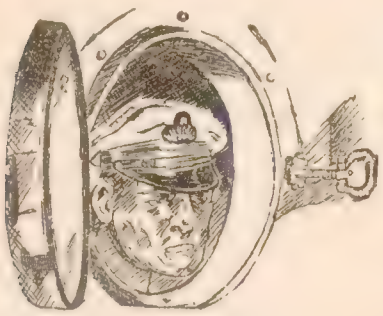
The glass of the port beside the outer door was suddenly shattered, and shots were fired through the open doorway of the operating room. They struck the auto-alarm, of no importance at present. Eldredge and the rest of his instruments were screened by the partition dividing the two rooms. The ports of the operating room overlooked the sea.

Eldredge grasped the sending key again. The door resounded to a terrific blow. Made to withstand heavy seas, it opened outwards, and could not be forced in. It would have to be broken down.

Eldredge wondered about the antenna. Whoever might try to disconnect it again at the lead-in while he was transmitting would get jolted off his feet. If the runt who'd come in a while ago was an operator intended to take his place, he ought to think about letting down the antenna from between the masts.

The door cracked and splintered to another onslaught. Leaning back anxiously, Eldredge caught a glimpse of the edge of an axe before it was worked out. He began

to tap faster, hoping desperately that the destroyer operator wasn't a green man at the game. He told in brief what had happened. To give the destroyer some idea of the *Loronzo's* position, he added her sailing time and destination, not forgetting the wide sweep to avoid traffic. Finally, to enable the destroyer to get a compass bearing with her direction-finder, he began to send long dashes.



His mind was now free to speculate on the amazing events of the past hour. The scuttling, he felt sure, had been faked by the chief engineer and the chief mate. It would be easy for the chief to get the assistant engineer on watch out of the way, pump up ballast tanks to put the ship lower in the water and give her a list; then pretend the pump connections were all wrong, pull the light switches, and start a panic, the chief mate lending a hand. By remaining behind, it would look as if they'd lost their lives. With a spare crew hidden away in one of the storerooms—that blond runt must have been one of them—they could steam the ship away, disguising her meanwhile if necessary.

But how had they managed to fool Captain Wieghardt? But had they? Good weather was needed for the scheme. He'd waited for it. Also, he'd taken a wide sweep—away from port traffic. And he'd sent up no rockets, and had chased him from the radio cabin before he could trace the antenna trouble. If he wished to return to Puerto Benevides, he'd naturally go off in the boat. All this talk about fearing sabotage and being anti-Nazi—it was the kind of trickery that was already a familiar story in Europe.

Above the onslaught against the door, Eldredge suddenly heard something whip against the roof. He knew its meaning even as his eyes flew to the radiation-meter pointer. It was motionless again. The antenna had been let down.

Eldredge quickly switched to the auxiliary receiving antenna and feverishly waited to hear from the destroyer. She opened up after a few minutes and advised that she had got a good bearing. She said the *Lorenzo* sounded loud enough to be within visual range.

Jubilant, Eldredge removed the headphones and rose. He stood back where he could see the door. Now that the antenna was down, the attack on the door was less furious. A hole was slowly being hacked into it. Soon a tattooed arm was thrust in. It felt for the key and turned it. The battered door was thrown open. The chief mate charged in, panting and gripping the axe. Behind him were some angry-faced men of Teutonic appearance, and a swarthy little man—the Italian steward. A nice little Axis gathering!

"There's a destroyer heading for here," Eldredge warned them. "If—"

The dimly lighted cabin was momentarily lighted by a brilliant sweeping beam.

"That's her searchlight. If I'm missing when she boards—"

The chief mate's sloe-eyes blazed with baffled fury. "Eet ees well for you we do not stop you in time," he choked. "What for you steeck your beeg nose in thees business?"

Eldredge grinned. "I don't know what business you mean, but, boy, if you didn't want an S. O. S. sent out, you sure got the wrong guy for an operator!"

SEVERAL months later the captain and some of the officers on a freighter in mid-Pacific were gathered round a short-wave radio.

"We now bring you," the announcer began, "the first in a series of true S. O. S. stories in which members of the Associated Radio Company's own communications department were at the key. Tonight we dramatize the thrilling *Lorenzo* affair. The *Lorenzo,* you may recall from newspaper accounts, was the vessel whose captain and three of his staff were implicated in a plot to seize her arms cargo and landed it secretly in South America for an intended Nazi *coup.*

"The plot would undoubtedly have succeeded but for the heroic sense of duty that inspired Operator Eldredge to return to his post—"

Second mate Grasser looked up, grinning. "First time I've heard girl fever called that."

"Don't interrupt," growled the captain. ". . . begins in the radio cabin of the *Lorenzo* with a conversation between Eldredge and Second Mate Grasser. Eldredge, who has since been appointed a shore inspector—"

"He bought a ring with his first month's salary," chuckled Grasser. "If— Aw right, aw right. I'll pipe down."

Four-Footed Dynamite

BY S. OMAR BARKER

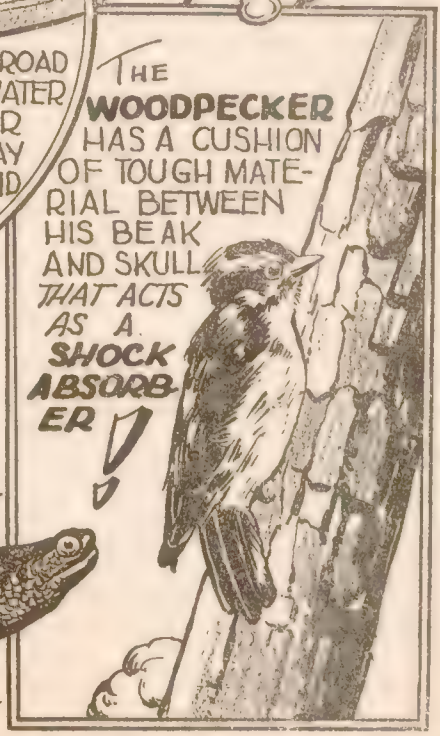
THEY asked me, "What's a rodeo?" I told 'em that I knowed,
But to put it into language was a job that had me throwed.
It's hoofs an' horns an' hoss-sweat, an' the smell of western dust;
It's rannyhans to wrastle an' it's buckin' broncs to bust;
It's loops to ketch a calf with, piggin' strings to tie him down;
It's the daring-do of hossback men, the rangeland comes to town.
It's bawlin' steers to straddle—an' it's bones to bust an' bruise,
It's Olympics of the saddle, if you win or if you lose.
It's men that pay an entrance fee for jest a *chance* to win—
If all they win's a busted leg, they take it with a grin.
It's ropin'-hosses smart enough you'd think they been to school—
An' so they have. It's years they've been in trainin', as a rule,
With some ol' cowboy teacher usin' patience by the quart
To learn 'em how to ketch a calf an' hold him like they ort.
Of course there's rules to go by, jest like any other game,
But the livestock sure cain't read 'em, so it don't come out the same;
For though a ball game can be "throwed"—an' sometimes is, I hear—
You cain't buy off a buckin' bronc nor "fix" a Braymer steer!
The old West ain't as roomy as it was some years ago,
But still it sprouts adventure—so we've got the rodeo,
Where the men that's knowed as cowboys keep their hossback honor bright
By rope an' spur an' saddle, on four-footed dynamite!

Curioddities By Weill

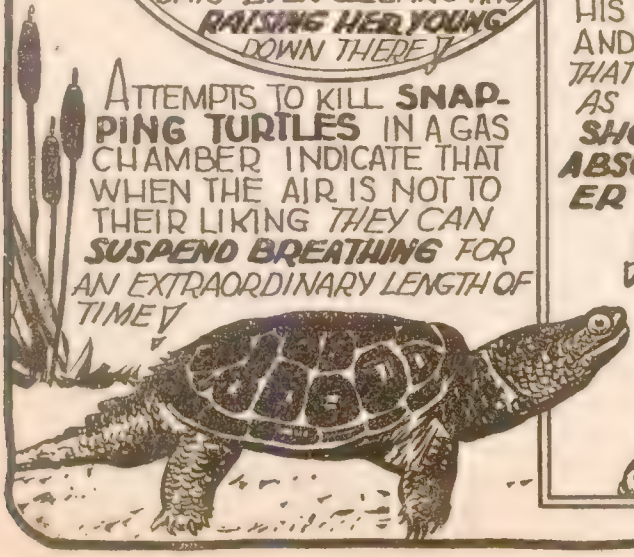
TO DRINK A TOAST IS TO PERPETUATE A CUSTOM WHICH GOES BACK IN UNBROKEN SUCCESSION TO THE DAYS OF THE **GREEKS** AND **ROMANS**. *A ROMAN GALLANT WOULD DRINK AS MANY GLASSES AS THERE WERE* ***LETTERS*** *IN THE NAME OF HIS MISTRESS*

THE **WATER SPIDER** SPINS A BROAD AIRPROOF WEB UNDER THE WATER AND FILLS IT WITH FRESH AIR FROM ABOVE. SHE CAN STAY UNDER WATER FOR HOURS AND DAYS—*EVEN SLEEPING AND* ***RAISING HER YOUNG*** *DOWN THERE*

THE **WOODPECKER** HAS A CUSHION OF TOUGH MATERIAL BETWEEN HIS BEAK AND SKULL *THAT ACTS AS A* ***SHOCK ABSORBER***!



ATTEMPTS TO KILL **SNAPPING TURTLES** IN A GAS CHAMBER INDICATE THAT WHEN THE AIR IS NOT TO THEIR LIKING *THEY CAN* ***SUSPEND BREATHING*** *FOR AN EXTRAORDINARY LENGTH OF TIME*

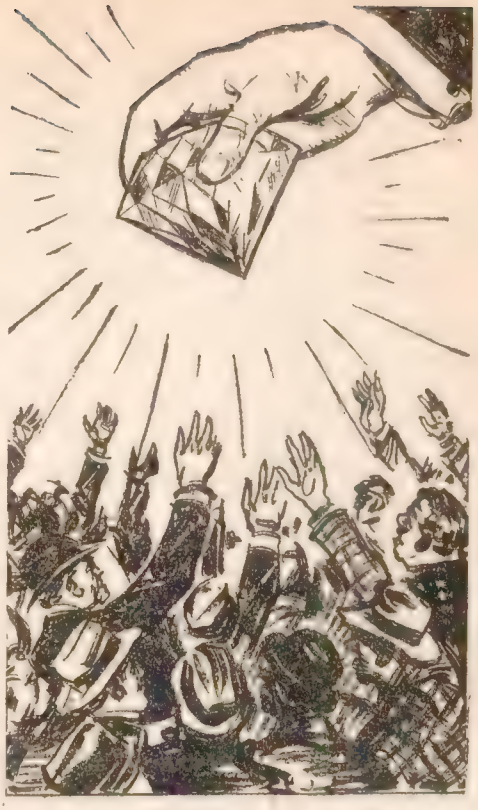


HOW MANY ATOMS IN A DROP OF WATER? *See Curioddities next time.*

The Keg Of Diamonds

By GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL

Author of "Gila River Pirate," etc.



OF THE four men who started on that prospecting trip into Colorado Territory, only Johnny Latham returned. And he came back with a bonanza find that dwarfed the Comstock Lode and threatened a stampede greater than that of '49. For the first time, referring to Johnny's bonanza, men spoke of billions of dollars.

That fateful afternoon young Johnny Latham's party were working along a pine-clad ridge north of Brown's Hole, not far below the new line of the Union Pacific Railroad. Johnny had done some prospecting before, in the foothills west of the Sierras. He was used to heat. But he was not used to the high altitude of this Colorado country. His lean young face was gaunted and his tall frame drooping from the sheer labor of gasping enough oxygen into his lungs. His partners weren't any better off. But they followed along as Johnny led them out onto a high, rough mesa. Here tilted strata had weathered into jagged outcrops. Aspen, and wind-twisted pines and high-country shrubs stippled the tableland.

When they reached a gulch that blocked their way across the mesa, Johnny sat down onto a boulder.

"I ain't tired," he said, grinning at his partners. "I just like to sit and drink in scenery."

"Huh. You can have the scenery," Sime Wallace grunted. "I want something you can put ice in and spit at a lizard."

"Well, *I'm* tired," Neile Wyatt said. "If a grizzly come at me right this minute, I wouldn't run. I'd warn 'im I was wore down to bone and sinew and wouldn't make a meal for a sparrow."

Luke Garrett was busy unscrewing the canteen top and didn't even speak. He tilted it to his lips; but couldn't take long swallows, on account of having to pause and gasp in a hoarse breath of air so often.

"What a country!" chubby Sime Wallace groaned. "The air is so thin you choke to death if you take too long a drink. Look at Luke."

All looked at him, grinning. And so they all saw as the canteen fell from his hands and clattered onto the ground. And Luke Garrett leaned forward and collapsed into a grotesque heap in the dust, a blotched, pulsating hole in the side of his

head—while on the thin, hot air lingered the sharp *cra-a-ack* of a rifle shot.

For a moment no one of the other three men stirred; stricken, unbelieving, they sat there. Johnny Latham's young nerves and quick wits were first to jar out of that shock of surprise.

"Drop flat to the ground, all of you—there might be a second shot."

He crouched down, and Neile Wyatt obeyed; but Sime sat where he was, staring, gasping, "He's dead. That bullet caught 'im right behind the ear. He's dead, he's—"

Johnny lunged at him and pulled him flat to the ground.

"Get hold of yourself, Sime."

Wallace was a thick-set man of forty with the querulous nerves of an undersized invalid. He whimpered and struggled as Johnny held him down. Johnny swore softly at him without even being conscious of it. Johnny's keen dark eyes studied the mesa for sign of the man who had shot that bullet, and Johnny's alert young wits tried to sort some reason for such a murderous shot coming utterly without warning. So far as he had known, his party was alone in this district—and there just was *no* reason why anybody should sharpshoot one of them.

"I don't see anybody. Not even powder smoke. How about you, Neile?"

Wiry, gray-haired little Neile Wyatt muttered, "Wind's pretty strong. Could've blown the smoke away. There's so *damn* much cover on this mesa for a sneakin' drygulcher!"

"But why should anybody take a shot at us?"

"Maybe this mesa is a rustlers' hideout."

"Let's get goin'," Johnny decided. "Neile, bring up one of the burros. We'll heft Luke onto one."

Neile Wyatt nodded and started back toward the four pack burros of the party. The animals were cropping thriftily at a clump of sugarbush.

Cra-a-ack! Again that rifle lashed out. Lead struck wood with a thump—and the nearest burro lurched and stumbled to its forelegs and fell. Johnny swore in consternation. For that slug had smashed through a keg of water slung on the burro's back before tearing into the burro's spine. Precious water was sluicing out of the container.

Neile Wyatt darted into a crouching run toward the stricken burro; while Johnny stared wildly around—for powder smoke, for moving brush, for some sign of that lurking killer.

"Show yourself!" Johnny shouted. "What in hell you shootin' at us for? We ain't huntin' nobody!"

No answer came. The rugged mesa seemed as empty of other men beside Johnny's party as ever. Neile Wyatt was crouched down beside the dead burro, working swiftly to save what he could of the spilling water from the broken keg by emptying it into a canteen.

"Johnny, we b-better go back," Sime Wallace blubbered.

"Sure," Johnny said reassuringly. "Come on. We'll—"

For a third time that rifle spoke. And this time Johnny caught the spurt of powder smoke low in a dense clump of mountain laurel. Johnny whipped up his sixgun and put four bullets into that laurel bush as fast as he could pull trigger.

Then Johnny leaped up, yelling, "Come on, Neile! Let's run that drygulcher out into the open."

"But There Are No Diamond Mines in the United States!" . . . . "There Weren't Any in South Africa, Either, Until Someone Discovered Them."

He looked back at Neile—and choked out an oath. Neile was on the ground, slumped over that broken keg and the canteen he'd been filling. The water was gurgling wastefully into the dust.

"He got Neile!" Sime Wallace bawled. "He got Neile and he'll get us if we don't get away!" In his panic he jumped up and would have run headlong back over their trail if Johnny had not caught him and dragged him sprawling onto the ground again. As it was, that rifle banged out and a slug hissed past Johnny's head as he flung himself prone.

And that rifle kept sounding. Three times more it blazed out as fast as a repeater could be levered. And every one of the burros belonging to Johnny's outfit was swiftly, ruthlessly slaughtered.

JOHNNY watched the spurts of gunsmoke. Johnny reloaded his sixgun. Recklessly he rose up and fired at the hidden rifleman. Three, four slugs he put into the clump of brush. And then again that rifle spoke—from a rock pile to left of the brush, and the slug slashed along the back of Johnny's forearm, paralyzing it, gouging a bloody furrow in the muscle. Johnny dropped flat, losing hold of his .45. But he snatched it with his left hand, while Sime Wallace gasped in panic.

"He got you, Johnny! He'll kill us all!"

That's what the hidden killer intended to do, Johnny reflected. *Murder every one of us. Wipe out our whole party. Why? We haven't done anything to him. We haven't even seen anybody since we left Brown's Hole. What's he got against us?*

"Sime," Johnny said, "my rifle is in the pack on my burro. I'm goin' to crawl over there and get it. Don't you move."

Hastily Johnny wrapped his bandanna around his bleeding forearm. Then, flat on his stomach, he started crawling toward the burros. What he had told Sime, however, wasn't true. Johnny wasn't merely going for a rifle—he intended to crawl into the brush and Injun around in back of that drygulcher. To stalk the stalker who kept himself so skillfully hidden.

Johnny reached the dead burros, and pulled his rifle from a pack. Then he crawled into the brush, beginning a long circle to bring him back of that rock clump from where the last rifle shots had come.

"Johnny!" Sime Wallace's bawl was almost a shriek, he was so panicky. "Where are you? Don't go off and leave me!"

Good Lord! The blame' fool's likely to come runnin' after me! "Stay where you are," Johnny called back.

But Sime Wallace was already on his feet, already running, his wits stampeded in fear. Johnny saw him coming, and Johnny leaped to his feet in dismay and shouted, "Get down, Sime! Get down!"

Then the shot came, the hard whipping report of that rifle. And Sime stiffened convulsively in mid-stride and fell headlong, plunging into a clump of brush from his own momentum. He never stirred after he was hit. Johnny glimpsed the spurt of rifle smoke plainly—from a jut of rocks at the rim of the gulch cutting across the mesa. And Johnny, wild with rage, lunged recklessly toward the gulch, firing his pistol at the flash of sun on a rifle barrel.

Again that rifle spoke. The ground heaved under Johnny's feet; the sun leaped high, and his head thudded as if to a thunderclap, and oblivion blacked-out his senses.

IT WAS cold—the bone-searing cold of night at 7,500 feet elevation—and the slash of pain like a jagged sword in his shoulder, which wrenched and hauled Johnny back to consciousness. Johnny started to sit up, and his left arm gave under him, and set the warm blood to flowing again from the gaping wound in his shoulder. He set his teeth against the agony, and waited until the shadowy brush and cold, brilliant stars quit rocking in a blur. Then he lurched to his feet. He looked around, hunting for Sime Wallace. Giddy weakness hit him like the blow of a

gun butt. Next thing he knew he was on his hands and knees again. He had lost blood, he realized. He had lost an awful lot of blood.

Vaguely he knew that the road of the mesa led back along the piney ridge. He ought to get away, he told himself; he ought to find help, and come back with men who'd track down that killer—who'd take care of Neile or Sime if they were still breathing. Again he lurched to his feet. Off to his left, he made out the shadowy loom of the pine ridge—that seemed to rock and sway against the stars. He started walking, and managed a half-dozen steps before nausea and weakness wrestled him down. For long moments he lay prone; it was exquisite pleasure just to lie still, to let a blur and numbing of unconsciousness draw over him like a warming blanket. But that one spark of purpose burned into him. He had to get away. He had to go on—

Again he staggered erect, and lurched a dozen steps, and slumped to hands and knees; but on he went, on hands and knees, slumping and wobbling in weakness like a wounded bear. Head down, he crawled through brush, painfully climbed over piles of rock he could have gone around, and ached along, every minute of effort like an anguished eternity.

The stars dimmed as streams of amber and ruby slashed into the eastern sky. The sun blazed up, and he wasn't even aware. The night chill curdled into a glaring, high-country heat. Thirst touched a raw edge of flame to his fatigue-stunned nerves, awakening a thousand darts of agony. It was more than flesh and blood could stand. He sprawled on his face. Tried to rise up again, but blackness weighed down upon his senses, flattening him out, leaving him limp and inert and unaware.

A CANTEEN was forced between his lips, and cool water whirled like silvery balm inside his parched mouth.

"That's all for now, son. Ease up. You'll get more as soon as you can stand it."

The voice was friendly, and concerned.

"Gosh, Strap, you reckon he ain't too far gone?"

"Likely he is, but we'll keep tryin'."

A dampened neckerchief bathed Johnny's temples and his throat. Again a mouthful of water was urged between his lips. He stirred and opened his bloodshot eyes, and blinked from the sun.

"Feelin' better, lad?"

He saw, bent over him, a burly, middle-aged man with iron-gray hair and mustache—a strong, calm, square-set man with the deep bronze of skin and the netted wrinkles about slate-gray eyes that years of prospecting desert and mountain gave a fellow. He wore a faded bandanna about his neck and a battered old sombrero on his head, cowboy fashion; and in his slow words was just the hint of a Texas drawl that had been burred out of use by years and distance.

He had a partner, Johnny saw—a thin, lanky hombre with a pockmarked face, high cheekbones, a drooping longhorn mustache and a bald head that was startlingly white from being protected against the sun by a hat. His eyes were not slate gray like his burly partner's, but a lighter, faded gray. And he hung back a little, as if in everything he was his burly *compadre's* echo and shadow.

"Some more water," Johnny begged.

"Sure, all you need. But just a little at a time," the burly man cautioned. "How'd you get shot, son?"

"Drygulcher. Don't know who—don't know why. He killed my partners. J-Just wiped 'em out."

"Where'd it happen?"

"Back—west, I guess. Don't know exactly where I am."

"Lad, you left tracks like a rabbit runnin' from a hound with hydrophoby. You rest, now, and talk later."

Johnny slumped back. A little more water and a judicious slug of whiskey eased

him enough so that he dozed off into sleep that was a raw, red nightmare of anguished recollection. He woke up shouting and the burly prospector gave him more water. His bullet wounds were dressed, but they hurt like fury.

There was a lot of resilient comeback in his tall young body, and by nightfall when the lanky prospector cooked up a jackrabbit stew and johnnycake, Johnny managed to sit up and gulp down some food.

The two older men ate quietly. The burly hombre with the Texas drawl and the strong, quiet dignity said his name was Strap Morgan. The lanky old-timer was Baldy Jones. They handed Johnny food and refilled his coffee cup with a friendliness that won his deep gratitude.

"Lad," Strap Morgan asked Johnny finally, "you reckon you could pick out your back-trail for us?"

Johnny shook his head. "Don't know. I don't remember much."

"Strap, maybe we can follow his trail?" Baldy said.

"Maybe, but— Look, Johnny, will you try guidin' us back the way you came?" Strap repeated. "It's important."

Johnny wearily shook his head.

"Look, boy." Strap Morgan leaned forward, his broad, calloused palm upheld. Something rested on his hand. "See 'em?"

On Morgan's hand were some odd-shaped lumps of what looked like milky quartz, among them one stone that gleamed with a myriad dancing darts of fire.

"Looks like—a gem," Johnny said.

"Yeah." Strap Morgan's heavy voice was vibrant with taut-held excitement. They all are, lad. Diamonds, lad. *Diamonds.*"

"Where'd you get 'em?" Johnny asked.

"*You* tell us!" Baldy Jones blurted, his high-pitched voice oddly like Strap Morgan's deep, steady one.

Johnny stared, his bloodshot dark eyes bewildered.

"What d'you mean?"

"Lad," Strap Morgan explained, "when we found you lyin' senseless on the ground you were clutchin' these in your fist."

"Why, I couldn't've been. Never saw 'em before."

"You just don't remember seein' 'em before. Johnny, while you was crawlin' along, loco and half-dead from loss of blood, you must've blundered into some old claim that the Injuns got precious stones out of." *

Johnny caught a sharp breath of realization.

"*Then* that's it. That explains it!"

"Explains what?"

"Why that gunman shot us up. We must have been near this claim of his. He was afraid we'd discover it. So he set out to kill the lot of us."

Morgan frowned, then shrugged and nodded.

"Maybe. But, lad, can you show us where you found these gems?"

"Good Lord, no! Besides, if we went there—"

"That gunman 'ud take potshots at us, huh? Well, I been thinkin' about that. We could go at night."

"But could we find anything at night? Besides, it 'ud still be risky."

Strap Morgan turned the gems in his thick, strong fingers; and in his deep voice was the rasp of tremulous excitement.

"Look at the fire in 'em. This big one must be worth at least ten thousand.

And Baldy Jones said, "There may be more where that came from. A lot more, a whole lot more!"

NEXT morning Baldy Jones stayed in camp with Johnny; but burly Strap Morgan left camp with a determined gleam in his eyes.

* Perhaps it seems strange to speak of diamond mines in the United States. But the time of this story is 1871. The great diamond fields of South Africa had been but recently discovered. There were geological formations in the United States like that of the South African diamond fields, notably in Arizona and New Mexico, and prospectors *did* go looking for diamond mines.

He returned in mid-afternoon, his strong, broad face peaceful with satisfaction.

"Lad, I followed your trail," he told Johnny abruptly. "You sure traveled like a sidewinder dodgin' a roadrunner. I followed your sign up to that piney ridge and up onto a rough mesa."

"You get shot at?"

"No, I stayed hid in the brush." He looked at his partner, and his fleshy face tightened. "Baldy, after dark, we go up there. These stones must've come off that mesa."

"I'll go with you," Johnny said hoarsely. "I feel a lot better."

"But if we run into trouble," Baldy Jones objected, "you couldn't travel fast."

"Let 'im come," Strap said. "Nobody can out-run bullets, not even in the daytime. Get some more sleep now, son."

After dark they started out. Burly Strap Morgan led the way toward the piney ridge looming against the sky that still held a lofty sunset glow. And as they walked, Strap explained that he had searched the ground over which Johnny had traveled and had found no sign of valuable mineral. Johnny must have picked up the diamonds somewhere on the mesa. Up along a broad ledge slanting onto the mesa they hiked, not talking, moving with stealthy caution.

And there on the mesa, Strap Morgan halted. He lit a small "bug"—a candle in a tin cup, with a wedge of tin folded out to spill the light. Bent low over the ground, then, Strap and Baldy nosed out Johnny's trail with the skill and persistence of Piute trackers.

Across the mesa, to that gulch which split the center of the tableland they moved. Johnny's crawling tracks had skirted the gulch.

"Look!" Strap Morgan said suddenly.

Under the candlelight an ant hill shimmered as if powdered with glass. Johnny bent down, and clawed with his fingers into the fine dirt, and brought up a handful. Baldy dug up some earth, too, and in the light they sifted it.

"Look at this!" Johnny gasped.

He held a raw chunk of substance that had a dull sheen in the light.

"A diamond, and a sizable one!" Strap said.

They bent down again, and with a stick and knives they gouged and tore the top soil. And they found gems. Dozens of small diamonds, scores and scores of them, as they worked along the rough terrain near the gulch. Excitement was a racing fire in their veins. Johnny found the first big stone—a yellowish diamond the size of a wild grape. But almost at once old Baldy found one four times as large! Many more small stones they dug up—some white, some blackish, many yellowish in color. And then Johnny found a sapphire as large as a pigeon's egg—but Strap Morgan held up a diamond that froze them all in amazement, for it was even larger than the sapphire.

"Let's move along the gulch," Johnny suggested hoarsely. "Let's see how far the deposit extends."

Almost anywhere along the gulch they found gems. Not only diamonds. For, as they moved toward the edge of the mesa, Johnny picked up an emerald as large as

a gooseberry; and Baldy found several smaller ones. Strap found the first ruby, but nearby, both Johnny and Baldy dug up dozens of them, some breath-taking in size.*

Baldy Jones kept swearing under his breath, in a wild, giddy excitement that was like a high drunk. "Damn my old bones! Damn my bones, but this beats all. Damn my old bones!" And even Strap Morgan, whose burly calm seemed too monumental to be staggered by anything, held stones under the light of the bug with a great hand that shook as if with a fever. And Johnny's own heart was pounding, *pounding,* and in his brain throbbed a dizzying realization—"Lord, what a bonanza! What a bonanza!"

Strap Morgan's tobacco pouch was almost full, and he was putting into it some gems Baldy had just handed him, when across the night quiet crashed a hard, re-echoing *cr-a-ack.*

Over their heads whipped a bullet.

Strap Morgan flung himself to the ground, falling onto the bug and extinguishing it. Baldy crouched low, pulling Johnny down. And Morgan whispered, "Don't move or talk!"

But Johnny did talk. Johnny blurted wildly, "That man who's guardin this place has seen us. If we don't get him, he'll kill all three of us."

Reassuring Strap Morgan pointed out, "But it's dark, Johnny. Long as we don't show a light he can't see us. We'll slip away. Me first, you two follow close. And for God's sake, don't kick up any noise!"

Strap Morgan led off, and Johnny and old Baldy followed. In spite of his care, Johnny was unsteady on his feet—and he kicked a rock that clattered against a boulder. Instantly Baldy Jones pulled him down, as a rifle *rip-p-ped* out behind them and a slug whipped close over their heads. Strap Morgan instantly turned at right angles; while that gunman behind emptied his repeater, sending a fan of bullets at the spot where they had been.

Johnny walked more carefully, now. Morgan led on at a good pace. No more bullets reached for them.

It was dawn by time they reached their own camp.

They had had no sleep; but none of them had desire for it. Baldy threw wood on the fire and put on the coffee pot. Strap Morgan unfolded a blanket, and emptied his bulging tobacco pouch upon it, the gems cascading out in a tumbling, sparkling swirl of color. Johnny caught his breath; Strap Morgan grinned slightly; old Baldy grunted, "So help me, I never saw so big a bonanza squnched down into so teeny a sack!"

"Samples," said Morgan. "These're just samples of what's on that mesa."

Johnny said, in sudden overwhelming dismay, "But we're just claimjumpers. That man doin' the shootin' has already found this diamond mine and it belongs to him."

"No," said Strap Morgan emphatically. "No diamond field has ever been found in this country before, so there's no laws ever been passed to cover diamond claims. You can't just put up monuments and go file on a diamond claim with the mining recorder, like you could if it was a gold claim."

"That explains the shootin' still more," Johnny realized. "That gunman's workin' the claim. He can't keep us or anybody else off by law, so he's doin' it by bullets."

"And a killer," Strap Morgan said heavily, "is an outlaw who's forfeited his rights. That gunman's goin' to be hunted down and hanged. Which'll leave the claim open, if you did grant that hombre any right to it."

"So," said Baldy Jones, "it might as well be us as anybody else who works this bonanza."

"Might, hell—it will be us!" whooped Johnny.

* This is fact. All details pertaining directly to the precious stones are matter of record, as will be established further on.

"What do we do next?" Baldy Jones asked, looking at Strap Morgan.

"Work this claim."

"Keep it a secret, and work it fast," Johnny put in, his quick wits racing. "We got to get organized. We'll go to San Francisco and show these stones we've got to men with money. Even if we have to give up half a share in this diamond field, it'll be worth it to us. We'll organize a big outfit and come back with enough guns to drive any killers lurkin' around into a hole. And we'll comb every foot of this mesa for stones. We can't file claim to this diamond mine, but there's nothin' to stop us from turning it upside down and shakin' every gem out of it!"

Strap Morgan nodded. "You're talkin' sense, Johnny."

Johnny looked at Morgan's strong, calm face, and at lanky, gaunt old Baldy, and Johnny's throat choked up.

"I'd be dead, if it wasn't for you two," he blurted. "We'll be equal partners in this mine."

"Shucks, Johnny, *you* found it."

"Equal partners," Johnny insisted. "Shake on it."

They shook hands all around.

AT THE little Rawlins station they caught a Union Pacific train to San Francisco.

And on the afternoon of their arrival Johnny took his partners and their pouch of gems to the Bank of California.

"This is a big thing," Johnny told Morgan and old Baldy. "We want the biggest money man in the West to help us out. William Ralston is Cashier of the Bank of California. Actually, he's the boss of it, and the man who's boss of the Bank of California is boss of the Comstock Lode. What's more, Ralston is easy to get to, and he's wide open for new ideas."

William Ralston was probably the most approachable financier of California. His office was not an inner sanctum guarded by a suspicious-eyed Cerberus of clerk, secretary and minor executive, but an open room right on the main floor of the bank to which the door always gaped invitation. Here came real estate promoters like Asbury Harpending with tremendous schemes to wrest city lots out of the bottom of the bay. Here came widow-women whose husbands had died in Comstock mines, seeking money help. Here came Leland Stanford, needing a hundred thousand dollars to tide the Central Pacific over a make-or-break crisis. Here came men with plans to manufacture clocks and woolens and wines and furniture. And no one with a real claim or a sound idea left Ralston empty-handed. No one in San Francisco had as great a financial finger in as many lucrative business pies as had William Ralston—and no one had as many grateful friends and admirers.

A strongly built, handsome man—brown-eyed, balding, his beard short and thick—he possessed a great deal of charm of manner. Standing before Ralston's desk Johnny at once felt confidence in the man. No red tape and no hide-bound business rules would keep Ralston from helping him.

Johnny introduced himself and his partners and got right down to business. "Mr. Ralston, we're prospectors. We've located a find that's so rich we wanted the most important man in California to back us in developing it."

Ralston smiled and shrugged slightly.

"Son, I have a dozen prospectors a day come in with—"

"But this is different, sir! It's not gold, and it's not silver. It's—it's *bigger* than gold or silver. It's so big that you've got to come in on it."

Johnny spoke with such earnestness, such low-voiced vehemence that Ralston was impressed. He stood up. He said, "Come along," and led the way into an inner office.

Here Johnny didn't try explaining with words; Johnny opened Strap Morgan's tobacco pouch and cascaded its contents of

precious stones upon a desk top in front of Ralston. The diamonds had a definite glow where their sides showed erosion; the rubies were like the molten heart of a sunset, and emeralds shone with a cool and brilliant luster. Mr. Ralston's handsome eyes widened, his deep chest lifted to an involuntary breath of utter amazement.

"Where did you get these stones?" he asked.

"For the time being," Johnny answered, "that will have to be our secret."

"They're genuine?"

"Of course. Before you take any steps, we'd want you to satisfy yourself perfectly on that score. Mr. Ralston, what would you say, offhand, that these stones were worth?"

Ralston looked up at Johnny, his brown eyes very serious.

"If genuine, they're worth a great deal, a very great deal."

"And they're merely samples, Mr. Ralston. Just *samples!*"

"You mean you've got more?"

"Mr. Ralston, these stones are just the samples we picked up in a few hours' digging."

"You mean you've located a diamond field?" Ralston asked sharply.

"That's right, Mr. Ralston, and we want your help in developing it!"

Ralston's strong fingers twisted nervously at his fine gold watch chain. His lips compressed and he shook his head in a taut little gesture of anxious thinking.

"But there's no precedent. This would be the first—the very first diamond mine—"

"Mr. Ralston," Johnny put in practically, "before we can make any deal at all, we've all got to be sure our feet are on solid ground. We'd like to leave this pouch of gems with you. We'd like for you to call in any and all jewel experts you choose, to appraise these gems. You've got to be convinced beyond a frog's-hair of doubt that these stones are genuine before you'll put any Bank of California money into this deal. We want to be just as sure. Is that fair enough?"

"Fair enough," Ralston agreed crisply. "Gentlemen, come back tomorrow afternoon. I'll write out a receipt for your pouch of gems."

JOHNNY had taken his partners to a little hotel around the corner of the bank, on Sansome Street. After supper, Strap Morgan and Baldy Jones said they'd like to take a little *pasear* among the fleshpots of the Barbary Coast. Johnny grinned at them and told them to go ahead; his wounded shoulder and arm, he said, were yelling like toothaches for him to crawl into a real bed and hibernate like a grizzly, so he'd stay put.

It was about an hour after they had gone that knuckles rapped on the door of Johnny's room.

He opened it, and a small, wiry man with wavy red hair shot through with streaks of gray, and peering, near-sighted eyes, came into the room. He looked at Johnny, and looked through the open doorway of the adjoining bedroom. His thin lips tightened.

"Strap Morgan's out, huh?"

"Yeah, and Jones, too. Friend of theirs?"

"Did Strap leave the money with you?" the man asked, ignoring Johnny's polite question.

"What money?"

"So he didn't." The man's thin lips made a hard, down-curving line. "Maybe he thinks I'm bluffing. So I'll just up the

ante a bit. You tell Strap Morgan that I want six thousand dollars and I want it tomorrow night."

Johnny's dark eyes burned with sudden anger.

"Just who shall I say barged in here like a road-agent and demanded six thousand dollars?"

The peering, near-sighted eyes narrowed.

"I don't like your tone. Just to teach you to respect your elders, I'll make it seventy-five hundred dollars."

"Why not a hundred thousand?" Johnny snapped.

The wiry little man lifted a hand, palm upturned, long strong fingers curved and closing into a grim, rapacious fist.

"You, and Strap Morgan and that toad-brained Baldy Jones—I hold you all *right there,* in the palm of my hand. Don't forget it!" the little man snapped.

Turning on his heel, he stumped out of the room.

Johnny stared, his lean young face both angry and amused. He had half a notion to run after the fiery little hombre and cuff an explanation out of him. And yet, to his amusement was an edge of concern. Instinct told him that the big-talking runt was dangerous.

It was almost morning before Strap Morgan and Baldy Jones returned to the hotel. Silent old Baldy was loquacious, and Strap was silent; for they had looked long and deep on fleshpots, most of which had, apparently, been full of rum. They were genially, drowsily drunk. Johnny told them about the high-stepping little man who had come to demand seventy-five hundred dollars.

"Did you give it to him, Johnny?" Baldy asked sleepily.

"No. He wanted the money from *you* and Strap."

Baldy didn't hear him at all; Baldy had slumped back onto his bed and already was snoring. So Johnny turned to Strap, and described the little man carefully again and asked Strap if he knew such a fellow. But Strap, out of a prodigious yawn, shook his head and said he didn't know the little man from Adam's off ox.

Next afternoon Johnny and his partners went again to the great bank on California and Sansome Streets.

They were ushered directly into Ralston's inner office.

Ralston was there, but not alone. With him were several imposing individuals whom he introduced as General David Colton, Mr. Asbury Harpending, Mr. William Lent, General Dodge, and a Mr. Rubery.

"Friends," Ralston said very soberly, "I have called in these business associates of mine because—we have a very great enterprise ahead of us."

"Then you're convinced that the stones are genuine!" Johnny blurted out excitedly.

Dramatically, Ralston turned toward a table covered with green baize. On it Strap Morgan's pouch rested. Ralston picked up the pouch, opened it, poured its wealth of gems out upon the baize. From the imposing, well-dressed men came a concerted gasp of startled wonder.

As much to them as to Johnny and Strap and Baldy, Ralston said, "I've had Shreve and Company, our foremost jewelers, study these gems all night. Their report is favorable. I may say, *very* favorable. In fact," Ralston paused for emphasis, leaned over the table and picked up that largest diamond which Strap Morgan had found, and held it up for all to see, "Shreve and Company have offered, for this one stone, the sum of $96,000."

Even Johnny gasped, at this news. Old Baldy grabbed Strap Morgan's elbow, as if to keep from reeling.

And tall, well-dressed Asbury Harpending burst out, "Good heavens, Ralston! At that rate, then this pouch of gems here is worth anywhere up to a million dollars!"*

*This is from Harpending's own account of these events.

Ralston nodded very gravely, and Ralston said, "But these stones you see, gentlemen, are but—*samples,* you said, Mr. Latham?—just samples from the diamond field located by Mr. Latham and his partners."

"Diamond mine! But there are no diamond mines in the United States."

"There were no diamond mines in Africa," retorted Ralston, "until somebody discovered them."

And General Dodge said, "We have geological formations resembling those of the African diamond fields in various parts of the West."

"If it's true," blurted Harpending—"why, man alive, it's a tremendous thing!"

"It *is* true," Johnny retorted, flaring up. "And if you're smart, you can come in and help develop it."

"We want to do that, Johnny," Ralston said gently. "But we want to be sure. We want to be *more* than sure. It happens that Mr. Tiffany of the New York firm of jewelers is in San Francisco. You will agree with me, gentlemen, that Tiffany's is the most responsible jewelry firm in the country?"

"Oh, yes!"

"As solid as the Treasury."

"So, if you and your partners, Johnny, are agreeable—I'd like to have Mr. Tiffany appraise these gems. Then, if *his* verdict is favorable, there is one thing more I want to do—"

"You're sure playin' safe!" Strap Morgan said. "Hell, we can go out and get a big grubstake from—"

"Nobody in San Francisco." Ralston interrupted, "can invest as many millions of dollars in developing your diamond field as *we* can. And we *will* invest millions. Provided we're sure. If Tiffany says these diamonds are genuine, I want to make up a party to thoroughly examine your diamond field. I want you to take that party to your discovery for a thorough investigation."

Again Strap Morgan objected. "But if we show you where the diamond mine is, there's nothin' to stop you from diggin' the gems without payin' us a cent."

General Dodge put in, "You could blindfold us, and not take the blinds off till we got right on the ground. Then blindfold us on the way out. We wouldn't be able to find your mine again."

"Yeah, we could do that," Strap Morgan agreed.

Johnny asked, "Mr. Ralston, whom do you want to send to look over the field?"

"My associates, these gentlemen here—and the foremost mining expert in the United States."

"Who's that?"

"I haven't decided yet. I'll ask—"

"Henry Janin," said Asbury Harpending. "Get him!"

"Yes, indeed," said Mr. Rubery. "Janin has a record of having experted some 600 mines, without once making a mistake."

Ralston nodded. "Agreed. We'll hire Henry Janin. Until tomorrow, then, let's adjourn."

But nobody turned away; they all stood there, silent, leaning forward around that table, staring at the careless heap of gems upon the green baize — the profusion of small diamonds that was a glowing bed for emeralds like green grapes and rubies like great gouts of blood, with here and there a great diamond that, polished, would sparkle like blue-white lightning.

"Samples," muttered General Colton. "A million dollars' worth of samples. Holy Mother of Grace!"

KNUCKLES rapped on the hotel room door.

Johnny was combing his dark hair. He'd bought a new suit of clothes and his tall, slim figure looked good in it, in spite of the bulge of bandage on his left shoulder. He was mending rapidly from his hurt; realization of how rich a bonanza he and his partners possessed was fine tonic.

He looked around as he heard that knocking on the door. Lanky old Baldy

Jones was stretched out on a bed, snoring. Strap Morgan, his burly figure stoop-shouldered, was leaning over a table, figuring with pencil and paper. He was totting up the money he'd spent since arriving in San Francisco. Since he was twelve, he had explained to Johnny, his old man had trained him to know where every cent he'd ever earned had gone. Not that it helped much, he admitted, to discover that he spent twice as much for whiskey as for meals.

Johnny walked to the door and opened it.

A hotel attendant ushered a young woman inside.

She was slim and young and pretty, neatly dressed in a suit of gray wool. Her hair was a vivid red that reflected the lamp light in lustrous gleams. Her eyes were blue—and scared and angry. She nodded to the attendant and he left, shutting the door. She looked at Johnny, then; she looked at Strap Morgan, and at old Baldy; and her sweet face went white with tension.

Johnny asked, "What is it, Miss?"

"Which one of you is Mr. Morgan?"

Strap Morgan rose lumberingly from his chair, his broad tranquil face showing a little frown of puzzlement. He tapped his broad chest, saying, "Why, I'm Morgan." And he pushed a chair forward considerately, and said, "Please to sit down, Miss."

But she didn't sit down. Her young bosom was lifting to agitated breathing that revealed tumultuous feelings.

"Last night, my father came here to see you, Mr. Morgan!"

The way she said it, it was bitter, damning accusation.

Strap Morgan's heavy, graying brows lifted.

"Not to see me, Miss. Nobody visited me here last night. I don't even know who your father is."

But Johnny knew suddenly. He asked, "Is your father a near-sighted little man with red hair that's streaked with gray?"

"Y-yes! Then he *was* here last night?"

Johnny nodded. "I talked to him. What's wrong? Something happened?"

"He's dead!" the girl burst out; "He never got home at all. This is the last place I know that he came to—and this morning, police found him lying in an alley behind the Bella Union, and — he'd been hit over the head and j-just left there—"

"I'm awfully sorry, Miss," Johnny said, earnestly. "But I assure you that we know nothing about it."

The girl was silent a moment, steadying herself.

Then she said, "He told me he was coming here to collect some money which you men owed him. Did you pay it to him?"

She was looking at Johnny; and he stiffened and answered, "I didn't owe him anything, Miss. So of course I didn't pay him."

Her feelings were starting to stampede her self-control.

"You didn't pay him the money you owed him," she cried. "Then he's found *murdered*. As if he were killed so that he couldn't ever collect that money you owe him!"

"But I didn't owe him anything." Johnny repeated. He looked around. "Strap, you, Baldy, did you owe this man any money?"

Strap said calmly, "We don't owe anybody in San Francisco any money."

"Besides," Baldy put in, "we don't even know who this girl is talkin' about. What's your father's name, Miss?"

"You're lying to me," she said. Tears welled in her eyes, but she fought them back; and her face became hostile and determined. "I'm going to look for evidence that you men owed dad money. There's bound to be *something* among his things that'll prove it. And if I find it, I'll have the police seize you for dad's murder!"

She whirled and darted from the room.

Johnny looked long and hard at his two partners.

Baldy's wizened old face was blank with befuddlement. Strap Morgan shook his iron-gray head and shrugged.

"Johnny, this is as loco-funny to me as it is to you."

Johnny snapped, "Did that girl's father have any reason to blackmail you two hombres?"

"Who in time *is* that girl's father?" Baldy Jones rasped querulously. "Gosh, Johnny, you saw him, but we didn't. We got no idea of who in creation you're even talkin' about."

"Makes no difference," burly Strap Morgan said quietly. "Nobody, anywhere, has got any reason to blackmail us."

"GENTLEMEN, I have Mr. Tiffany's appraisal of these gems," said William Ralston.

Johnny's heart was in his throat; beside him, in Ralston's office, old Baldy and Strap Morgan tensed. Johnny guessed that the news would be good; for handsome Asbury Harpending, standing beside Ralston's desk, was smiling.

"Your gems are very valuable," Ralston went on. "That is Mr. Tiffany's opinion. In fact, he is so *convinced* of it, that he has offered to pay a quarter-million dollars for a one-fourth interest in your diamond field!"*

Johnny let out a long, slow breath of relief and satisfaction. Beside him, Strap Morgan's big frame relaxed.

"Our next step," Ralston went on, "is to send a party back to your diamond field to verify these samples and estimate the probable yield. Mr. Henry Janin has wired that he will go with you, Johnny. Sooner you start now, the better!"

"There's still one more matter," Johnny said crisply. "Money. Mr. Ralston, my partners and I want a definite agreement, in writing, as to what you and your associates will pay us."

"And some cash on account," Strap Morgan put in quietly.

Ralston nodded. "Here's my proposition. We'll pay you $150,000 in cash, here and now, for this pouch of gems which you have left in my care—"

"But Shreve and Company offered you $96,000 for just the one large stone," Johnny objected.

Ralston smiled. "True. But, Johnny, a banker has to make money off his transactions. I intend to make plenty on this deal. Let's go on. We will further pay you, for all rights to this diamond field that you've found—"

"But we don't want to sell all rights," Johnny protested. "We want to keep a share for ourselves."

"—the sum of *five hundred thousand dollars, cash,*" Ralston went on, as if Johnny had not interrupted, "on the day that we are able to obtain a full legal claim to the diamond field. Now wait, Johnny. That's a good offer. Suppose, after we pay you men off, that we discover that the mine is shallow, with no values under the top soil? Suppose a cloudburst washes the field down the canyons, or a rockslide dumps half a mountain onto it? We'll have to put up a great deal of money to work the mine. Why, before we can even start, we'll have to begin expensive lobbying in Washington, D. C., to have the mineral laws amended so that we can take legal title to the diamond field. So if you men get a clear total of $650,000 cash, you're doing mighty well."

"We'll take it," Strap Morgan said decisively. "I'm tired of mining. I'm 55 years old. My share of that money will last as long as I'll need it."

"You b-bet!" Baldy Jones stammered.

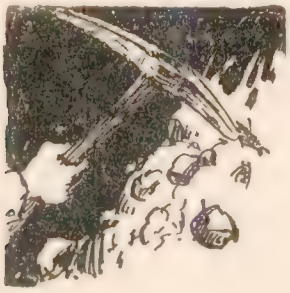
Ralston looked at Johnny. They all looked at Johnny. He swallowed hard. He thought the offer was far, far too little. But both Strap and Baldy wanted it so bad they almost ached out loud. Johnny nodded.

"All right. I'll string along."

*As a matter of strict fact, Mr. Tiffany was not in San Francisco at this time—Ralston sent samples of the gems to Tiffany in New York; and Tiffany proclaimed them very valuable and *did* want to buy a fourth-share of the diamond field for $250,000.

Ralston had an agreement ready for them to sign. That done, he put a check for $150,000 in Johnny's hands.

And Johnny discovered suddenly that his fingers were shaky and his throat parched. $150,000 was a lot of money



when it wasn't just dickering language. An awful lot of money when it was right in your hands. And there was a half-million more coming—

Asbury Harpending was rubbing his hands with satisfaction; and Ralston himself had a glow on his handsome face.

"Just one thing worries me," said Harpending. "Suppose we produce so many diamonds from this field that it'll glut the market and send prices crashing?"

"Forget it," Ralston said airily. "Only a billion dollars' worth of new diamonds could upset the market."

"That," said Harpending pointedly, "is why I'm worrying."

AT THE tiny Rawlins station on the Union Pacific, Johnny's party got off the train. Besides Strap Morgan and Baldy Jones, the party included four others—the engineer, Henry Janin, and General Dodge and Mr. Lent and General Colton.

At Rawlins the party rented horses and a pack outfit.

Starting off, Johnny and his partners did not lead the party straight to the diamond field. That mesa was but 15 miles away. But Johnny led the outfit on a long, roundabout route which took them two days to reach the piney ridge which led to the high mesa. And on the latter part of the trip, Johnny insisted that the engineer and promoters be blindfolded, so that they would not be able to re-trace the route. Not until the last payment had been received would Johnny reveal the route.

That night in camp, near the mesa, Johnny whispered to Strap and Baldy. They would not alarm the promoters by telling about the gunman who had been hiding on the mesa—who had almost annihilated Johnny's first party that reached the mesa.

"We'll have to find the bodies of those men, though, and bury them decently," Johnny said. "Part of the money I get I'm sending to their folks."

"We'll chip in, Johnny," Strap said.

"Us three," Johnny went on, "we won't dig. We'll show Janin where to dig. But we'll keep rifles in our hands—"

"And if that killer pops a gun at us, we'll smoke 'im out," Strap Morgan said grimly.

Next morning, as the outfit rode onto the high mesa, Janin, the engineer, nodded his head with satisfaction. He was a stocky, close-mouthed, graying man with a hard integrity about him.

"The geological formation here is right for diamonds."

Excitement like a ripple of electric current in them, the promoters and the engineer dismounted and started to dig along the rim of the gulch which cut across the mesa, where Johnny indicated. Johnny did not dig, however; neither he nor Strap nor Baldy even dismounted. Sitting their horses, rifles at alert, they carefully rode over the mesa, poked into dense clumps of brush, peered behind rock outcrops.

They did not find a lurking gunman. They found no sign of that treacherous killer.

But what was far more mystifying—though they found the coyote-and buzzard-gnawed carcasses of four pack burros—*they did not find the bodies of Neile Wyatt, Sime Wallace and Luke Garrett.* Those friends of Johnny's, who had died under the rifle of that unseen killer on Johnny's

first trip to the mesa—no sign of them whatever remained.

Strap Morgan jerked a thumb back at Janin and the other men, at work at the gulch edge.

"Listen to 'em! Sounds like they're lucky."

Cool-headed, iron-nerved General Colton was shouting like a kid at a picnic as he held up a couple of stones he had fingered out of a spadeful of dirt. Janin wasn't paying much attention; on his knees, the famous engineer was picking through an ant hill showing much diamond dust, uncovering a sizeable raw diamond.

On they worked. And almost every shovelful of dirt showed some glint of crystalline color. Small diamonds like granules they found most of all; but now and again they found a stone of a size that fetched a wild whoop from Colton and Mr. Lent, and which jarred from hard, silent Mr. Janin a low grunt that had all the vehemence of a shout in it. They found garnets. They found an occasional ruby like the small, bloodily angry eye of a grizzly; they found an occasional emerald that was like the green of a shallow sea.

Over and over General Colton kept saying, "I never knew there were so many gems. Lord, what a bonanza!"

Hard-headed Mr. Janin smiled, and nodded.

That night, Johnny and Strap and old Baldy took turns at sitting up to keep alert watch, loaded rifle ready, and campfire doused so that light would not make targets of any of them.

Nothing happened.

Maybe that killer's gone, Johnny reasoned. *Maybe he dug a big pouchful of stones and figured it would bring him all the money he'd need—so there was no reason for him to stay and be caught by a posse that might come to catch him and hang him for murder. Hell, it was only sensible for him to leave!*

Nevertheless, at the back of Johnny's mind lingered a hunch that that killer was going to avalanche sudden, violent disaster upon them.

During the next couple days, Henry Janin made an orderly survey of the mesa, digging to test the ground at various spots.

And the morning set to leave the mesa, Janin counted up the precious stones the party had found.

Working only with spades and knives, the men had dug up 256 carats of large diamonds, amounting in value at current rates to $4,096. They had dug 568 carats of small diamonds, worth $1,704. And they had dug up rubies by the pound, literally four pounds of rubies worth $2,226.

Henry Janin did some swift, astounded figuring, and his crisp voice shook with excitement as he announced, "Gentlemen, we have handled about a ton and a half of rock and dirt to dig out these gems. Just a ton and a half! Which means that this ground will return values of $5,000 to the ton. That's a figure unparalleled in mining history."

General Dodge mopped his brow and swore. Colton stared around, his eyes shining.

Mr. Lent breathed, "And there's at least a *thousand* tons of this ground to an acre."

AGAIN Johnny and his partners blindfolded the engineer and the promoters and led them back to the railroad. And still nothing happened to delay or endanger them.

On the train back to San Francisco, Henry Janin continued his figuring as he worked out the report he would make.*

Over and over he repeated, "This diamond field will prove to be the richest known to history. I've studied the old diamond mines of India, and the later mines of Brazil. I've traveled through the

*This report, when it appeared in the *Mining and Engineering Journal* of Dec. 10, 1872, created a tremendous sensation. Previous bonanza finds had conditioned the public for reckless speculation; this report touched off an explosive fever for investment. Would-be investors beseiged Ralston's associates for shares in the diamond mining enterprise, when he formed the San Francisco and New York Mining and Commercial Company.

Kimberley diggings of South Africa. In sheer extent, in ease of securing the gems, our diamond field surpasses them all. With just twenty rough laborers I can produce a million dollars' worth of gems every month. And that mesa will produce five million dollars' worth of stones to the acre."

Johnny sat there, silent; old Baldy Jones swallowed hard; and Strap Morgan pulled out his worn scratch pad and pencil with which he totted up his expenditures, and did some figuring, his thick fingers tremulous. All of them were still breathless and shaken by the magnitude of their find.

General Dodge asked, "Janin, you think the whole mesa will produce values?"

Janin nodded emphatically. "There's no reason why every acre of it should not yield as heavily as the ground we worked. It's all of it very similar, geologically."

"Mr. J-Janin," Johnny stuttered, his voice grating out as if its edges caught in his throat, "how many acres are there, of that mesa?"

"At least," said Janin, "three thousand."

Mr. Lent gasped. General Colton turned pale.

Three thousand times $5,000,000.

Three thousand times $5,000,000!

It was wealth beyond dreams. It was wealth beyond avarice. It was the riches of vast kingdoms. It was the opulence of Maharajahs and royal treasuries and silver galleons all rolled into one—

And Strap Morgan and old Baldy Jones and I, Johnny calculated, *we'll get a trifling half-million dollars more for our share! Deal with bankers and you get rooked. By God, I won't stand for it. I'll raise hell with Ralston. We still control this bonanza. They can't find the mesa without our help!*

"We'll urge Ralston to form a corporation immediately," General Colton was saying. "We'll capitalize for ten million dollars."

"No sale of shares to the public, though," Mr. Lent put in. "We'll invite, say, twenty-five of the leading financiers of San Francisco to come in. Limit each man to some $80,000 worth of stock. We've really got something, gentlemen. The Mother Lode yielded hundreds of millions of dollars in gold, and the Comstock produced even more millions of dollars in silver. But compared to our diamond field, the Comstock and the Mother Lode put together are just something you put into a blind man's hat!"

Over and over in Johnny's mind dinned those figures.

Three thousand times $5,000,000.

Back in San Francisco again, Johnny and his two partners did not put up in a cheap side-street hotel, but took a suite at the Parker House. Johnny had thriftily left his third of that $150,000, paid them by Ralston, on deposit in the bank. But Strap Morgan and old Baldy Jones had taken their shares in cash. They were suspicious of mere figures in a bank book; they wanted their money right where they could dig down and get aholt of it. They were even reluctant to take their share in paper money; they would have demanded good hard gold coin if the weight of it wouldn't have torn their pockets right out of their pants.

Johnny arranged with Strap and Baldy to meet them in Ralston's office at the Bank of California, then Johnny went out to buy himself some shirts and some tobacco.

Johnny was coming out of a store on Montgomery Street when a passerby in the crowd turned sharply and gasped his name.

"Oh, Mr. Latham!"

He stopped. In spite of himself, his pulse leaped; for it was that girl, the girl who had come to see him—the girl whose father had been killed just after he'd tried to collect money from Strap Morgan and Baldy Jones.

He smiled and said, "What is it this time, Miss?"

She colored, and stammered, "I've tried to find you. I—I've got to talk to you a minute—"

He realized, suddenly, that she was even prettier than he had remembered. Sunlight gleamed in burnished gold on her vivid red hair; a brooch on her white dress matched the clear blue of her eyes.

"You know," he said impulsively, "I don't even know your name?"

"Marcia Tarrant."

"If you'll take my arm, Miss Marcia, we can talk as we walk along."

She didn't take his arm; her sweet face was very troubled; and she was too honest and candid to mask the accusing anger which shone in her eyes.

Impulsively she opened her purse, and held it so that he could see a thick sheaf of money within it.

"That's two thousand dollars in hundred dollars bills!"

"Well, what about it?"

"I found it among father's things."

"Oh. Well, I'm glad he left you some money—"

"You don't understand! Mr. Latham, with this money was a note. That note was from the man who murdered my father."

Johnny stiffened, his lean young face perplexed.

"What did the note say?"

"It said, *'Tarrant, here is part of the payment I promised you. It'll have to hold you for awhile. You'll get the rest later'.*"

"Good Lord, Miss Tarrant, what in the world makes you think that note was written by the man who killed your father?"

"It stands to reason," she said vehemently. "Dad went to the only man who owed him money to collect. He didn't get the money. And he was killed so that he'd *never* get the money! That's the only possible motive for dad's murder. And the only man who owed dad money is the man whose name is signed to that note."

Icy prickles walked up Johnny's spine.

"Well? Who's the man? What *is* that name?"

"Morgan! The name is Strap Morgan!"

"Some mistake," Johnny said loyally. "Strap Morgan told me he didn't owe anybody in San Francisco money, and he didn't even know your father—"

"He told you that," she said breathlessly, "when he wrote that note to my dad and signed it with his own name? Good Heavens, don't you *see?* Morgan lied to you. Morgan's got something to hide."

"If you feel that way," Johnny retorted angrily, "why haven't you gone to the police about it?"

Something stark and tragic shadowed her blue eyes.

"B-because I wanted to find out, first, just what business dad had had with Morgan. You see, I know that— Well, father once served a prison term."

"You mean, you knew that he hadn't always been honest?"

She nodded, heartsick misery plain on her sweet face.

"So, if dad *was* in something—d-dishonest, I didn't want to—to—"

"Bring it all out into the open. Who was your father, anyhow? What business was he in? Where'd he come from?"

"He was a lapidary, working for Wills and Company, and— But what I want to know is, why did Morgan pay him this two thousand dollars? Why did Morgan owe him *more* money and—"

"I don't know," Johnny cut in, more harshly than he intended because he was very disturbed. "But I do know that Strap Morgan is honest. And that's more than you can say about your father."

The girl recoiled, and tears of anger and humiliation started to her eyes.

"Now I *will* go to the police!"

She turned and hurried down the street, her head bent as if she were stifling sobs with a handkerchief—a slim, graceful little figure in a white silk dress.

Johnny stood there, staring after her.

A lapidary. Her father had been a lapidary. The little man with the bad temper and the red hair streaked with gray, who had come to Johnny's hotel room demand-

ing five thousand dollars—*a lapidary!*

"Good Lord," Johnny gasped, his mind a swirl of appalling doubts. "Good Lord!"

HURRYING to Sansome and California Streets, Johnny strode into the Bank of California. Went straight to Ralston's office.

Strap Morgan and Baldy Jones had not yet arrived, but handsome Mr. Ralston greeted Johnny in friendly fashion.

"Plans are shaping up, Johnny," he said, and gestured for Johnny to sit down. "We're forming a corporation, and we've already got two million dollars paid in for shares. So we're all set, from the capitalizing end. But we can't start operations until we get legal title to the diamond field—which will be as soon as we can get a new mining law passed by Congress. We have our lobbying machinery already at work in Washington. Meanwhile, Johnny," he said, getting down to business, "I want you and your partners to go back to the diamond field and keep watch there. We don't want anybody else to find your stake and try to claim it."

Johnny swallowed hard. His throat felt suddenly dry.

"Our mine is awfully rich, if Mr. Janin is right?"

Ralston smiled. "Mr. Janin is *always* right."

"That," said Johnny, "is why I'm not satisfied."

"With what?"

"With the short end of the deal. You'll pay me and my partners just a half-million dollars more for a property that Janin says will likely produce three thousand times $5,000,000."

"You signed an agreement, Johnny."

"We had no notion the diamond field would be so rich."

"That's business, Johnny."

"But not equity."

"Well, what *do* you want?"

"No cash in advance at all. So if the mine proves to be a mere flash in the pan, we wouldn't have cheated you—"

"Good Heavens, lad, don't worry about that!"

"And, conversely, if the mine is so much richer than we expected, we should profit more," Johnny said stubbornly.

"How much more?"

"A fourth of all that's produced."

"That's exorbitant."

"But we found the mine, sir."

Smilingly Ralston shook his head.

"Johnny, the finders of bonanzas never profit much. The men with the hard cash to invest—they dictate the terms, they skim the cream. It's always that way."

"Not this time."

"But suppose I refuse?"

Johnny leaped to his feet, his thin young face flushing.

"Nobody knows the way to that mesa but my partners and I, Mr. Ralston!"

"Are you pointing a gun at my head?"

"To get fair play."

Mr. Ralston considered. He didn't smile; his strong fingers mechanically tore scratch paper to bits. He shrugged.

"All right. I'll ask my associates to agree."

Picking up a pencil, he slowly wrote out a new agreement. As he finished it, Strap Morgan and Baldy Jones stalked in.

Jubilantly Johnny blurted out to them, "We're getting a new agreement, fellows! Instead of payin' us off in cash, Mr. Ralston will arrange for us to get a fourth of the output of our mine."

Old Baldy, pulling up a chair to sit down in, suddenly froze. Strap Morgan, already

seated, lurched out of his chair with such a look of furious anger on his usually calm face that Johnny involuntarily stepped back a pace.

"No," Strap Morgan said.

And old Baldy screeched, "We want the deal like it was."

"Good Lord, Strap," Johnny said to Morgan, "a half-million dollars is just peanuts to what a fourth-interest in that diamond field will amount to. You forgettin' what Janin said?—the ground'll run $5,000,000 to the acre, and there's 3,000 acres!"

Baldy repeated, "I want cash, in a hurry!"

And Strap Morgan said, "It may take a year or two before the field is producing. I want the cash, as agreed, soon as we can get it."

Johnny was speechless. Mr. Ralston looked at him, at his two stubborn partners—and Mr. Ralston tore the new agreement to bits.

"Then the old agreement still stands, gentlemen."

Angrily, partly because he was so upset by what he considered his partners' stubborn foolishness, Johnny turned to Strap as they left the Bank of California and demanded, "Strap, you told me you didn't know a man named Tarrant—yet you paid him $2,000 and wrote him a note that you'd pay him more. How come?"

"Who told you that?"

"His daughter."

Burly Strap Morgan looked at Baldy Jones, and old Baldy sighed and said, "Might as well tell 'im, Strap."

So Strap, dull red burning out onto his broad, calm face, explained, "Johnny, I *was* payin' blackmail."

"Why?"

"Johnny, I came out to California with Tarrant. That was quite some time ago. It was on the *California,* the first steamship that rounded the Horn. Well, at Panama we took extra passengers on board, a lot of crooks among 'em. Somebody stole every cent I had. Tarrant shared my cabin, and he was nigh broke—so we partnered in a scheme to work together to trim some suckers at poker. I got thrown in the brig, and was told I'd go to jail when we reached San Francisco. I got out of the brig, but I had to knock the guard on the head, and—he died. Tarrant's held that over me as a club ever since. I been payin' him money, off and on. That $2,000 wasn't the last I paid him, either—I gave him $500 just the night he got killed."

Baldy said, "Somebody saw 'im with the money, and followed him down a dark street of the Barbary Coast and sandbagged 'im and robbed 'im."

"Well," said Johnny, "why not tell Tarrant's daughter the truth, then? She said she'd set the police onto us."

"Tell her?" gasped Baldy. "Good Lord, no! That'ud be walkin' right into jail. What'll you do, Strap?"

"Leave town." Strap's strong face had gone white. "Baldy, we're startin' for the diamond field right now."

"No more trains today," Johnny said.

"We'll take a river boat to Sacramento. We *got* to get out of San Francisco, pronto."

"Then you go ahead," Johnny said. "I'll go back to the hotel and pack our belongings. We'll meet at Rawlins."

This agreed upon, Strap and Baldy turned and hurried off. Johnny went on to the Parker House.

Striding through the lobby, he saw a pretty young woman take a chair behind a pillar. Marcia Tarrant! He would have walked over to her, but she had obviously tried to keep him from seeing her.

Johnny's mind raced as he climbed the stairs and turned down the corridor to his suite of rooms. She'd said she would go to the police—

His suite had an entrance on the main corridor, and a side door on another corridor. He walked swiftly past the front door, and turned down the other corridor to the side door; and carefully, noiselessly,

unlocked it. Peering inside, he saw no one in this bedroom. Stepping in, he walked to the inner doorway and looked into the sitting room. No one here, either.

"Guess I'm just spooked up," he decided.

His bedroom was the far one, opening off this sitting room. He walked into it. No policeman stood behind the door, no detectives lurked in the closet he saw as he opened it to start packing his clothes.

He saw a pair of shoes, then, which were not his own. They were on the floor, and resting in a very peculiar way. Not flat on the carpet, but up on the heels, as if—as if a pair of feet were in them. Feet of legs that went under the bed.

His heart suddenly yammering in his throat, Johnny bent and lifted the bed spread.

A man lay under the bed—a broad-shouldered, beefy-faced man who looked like a city plainclothes man. His features were contorted, his eyes starting from his head, his throat black with bruises. He had been choked to death.

"Good God! How d-did he ever get in here? Who—"

Rat-tat-tat! Knuckles pounded on the front door of the suite with a clatter that seemed to re-echo in Johnny's brain.

Johnny acted on wild impulse. He couldn't explain that dead man under his bed—

Johnny sprang to the side door, yanked it open, and lunged out into the corridor. Just as two men came hurrying around the corner of the hallway. They saw him the moment he saw them. There was no way for him to go—except right toward them; behind him the corridor dead-ended.

But across the corridor was a closed door. Johnny sprang toward it, the knob turned under his hand and he jumped inside, slamming the door shut, flattening himself against the wall as a woman sat up in bed and screamed.

The door flung violently open and a man rushed in, tripped over Johnny's outstretched foot and crashed sprawling to the floor. But the man behind him saw it, and he had a pistol in his fist. Johnny ducked and sprang. The gun seemed to roar into his face, but the slug hissed past his ear—and his fist smashed to the man's face, knocking him sideways to the floor. Down the corridor Johnny sprinted; turned a corner, ran down a back stairway and out a side door of the hotel onto the street.

He hailed a cab; rode straight to the bay, and took a boat across to Oakland. And there, he hid in the back room of a saloon until late at night—then caught a California Pacific train for Sacramento. Next morning he boarded a Central Pacific train that would take him to Rawlins, in Wyoming Territory.

JOHNNY slept little on that long ride. Marcia Tarrant, her acid-tempered father, that dead man under the hotel bed, that crime in Strap Morgan's past—all of it mixed in his thoughts to fume up in a giddy aching of dread. It laid a shadow of something sinister over the finding of that diamond field.

Marcia Tarrant's father had been a lapidary. A gem-cutter. An expert on precious stones.

It was funny, grim-funny, that it was a *gem* expert who had been blackmailing Strap Morgan. It looked as if — But Johnny couldn't quite bring himself to state the awful possibility. Their diamond field had been proven—tested and proven, over and over again!

He looked for Strap Morgan and Baldy Jones when he left the train at the little Rawlins station. He asked the station agent if his partners had arrived. They had. Strap and Baldy had stayed in Rawlins all night, and left for the mesa just an hour ago.

Johnny rented a horse and started up-trail after his partners.

It was late afternoon, and he was riding along the base of that piney ridge near the mesa before he saw Strap and Baldy Jones. They had pulled their horses back of a

laurel clump and were standing up in saddle and staring at the mesa when he reached them.

"Hi!" he called. "Gosh, did *I* walk into a mess of trouble! When I reached the hotel—"

He choked up. Strap and old Baldy had turned to look at him. They did not call a greeting. Baldy's seamed face was panicky; Strap was flushed with rage.

He pointed a finger at the mesa. Said, "Look."

Johnny looked. And his heart stuffed up into his throat.

There on the high mesa, on their diamond field—*two men were moving.*

Baldy screeched, "Somebody else has found our mine."

It was something else that flashed into Johnny's mind with staggering force. That unseen killer. The man who had shot from ambush to kill Johnny's partners on his first trip to the mesa. Was the killer on the mesa now? With a partner?

"Come on," Strap Morgan said hoarsely.

They dismounted. Left the horses. Started cautiously, noiselessly, up the trail onto the mesa.

Drawing near, they saw that one of the two men on the mesa was stout and bald. He was busy putting up camp and cooking. The other hombre was a man of about thirty. Well-built, dressed in boots and worn khaki, wearing eye-glasses, he had a clean-cut, school-teacherish air about him.

With a spade, he was testing the soil here and there.

And he was finding diamonds.

He was talking to himself as he worked. When he found a gem, he would straighten up from the ground and finger it in the sun, shaking his head in wonderment and an odd, restrained anger. Once, very strangely, he threw back his head in a loud laugh—which had little merriment in it.

Baldy whispered, "Strap, what we goin' to do?"

Strap pulled his pistol from hoslter, "broke" it and made sure it had a cartridge in every chamber.

Johnny said sharply, "That man's got as much legal right to be on the mesa as we have!"

Strap nodded. "Uh-huh. But I aim to keep 'im there for a bit. If he left before we want 'im to, he could start a stampede that would bring fifty thousand men onto this mesa. Come on."

They strode on, right into the strangers' camp.

Seeing them, the two newcomers did not snatch for their weapons, did not lunge into the cover of the brush. The stout cook grinned a welcome; and the husky, school-teacherish man in spectacles called "Hello! Just in time for supper."

Johnny said "Hello. Why, thanks—" And Baldy managed a hello, but Strap Morgan, grim-faced, said nothing.

They sat down on camp stools the young fellow offered them; and silently accepted the steaming plates of venison and Dutch oven biscuits the cook offered them.

"My name's Clarence King," the young fellow in eye-glasses said. "My cook here is Paul Peffer."

Johnny introduced his partners and himself.

"Prospectors?" King asked, studying them through glasses that made his gray eyes seem big and intense.

Johnny nodded. "Are you?"

"Yes and no," King answered. "I'm a government geologist. I brought a crew through this country some time ago, surveying the 40th parallel of latitude for the U. S. Geological Survey. I listed such mineral resources as I found. When I heard rumors of a diamond field—of all things—out here, I came back to check up. I had *not* found diamonds when I came through here before."

Johnny gasped; and sat there, as if stunned, unable to find words. Baldy wheezed something, and shut up. Strap Morgan's hand started moving toward his belt.

Strap said, "But you've been looking now. You've—found diamonds?"

"Yes, I certainly have." King put down his food and looked straight at Morgan. "I've found a lot of diamonds. Amazingly many. This locality is geologically right for diamonds. *But.* I've found four different kinds of diamonds here. Four varieties which do *not* occur together naturally. Moreover, I've found diamonds here in conjunction with Oriental rubies, garnets, spinels, sapphires, emeralds and amethysts—which is an association of gems impossible to find in nature."

Johnny gasped, "Good Lord!" He couldn't help it.

"Moreover," King went on with a ring in his voice that wasn't ordinary anger but profound indignation, a deep and impersonal sense of outrage, "I've found gems in places where nature alone could never have placed them. Gems which have obviously been stamped into the ground by a man's boot. Gems which have been placed in rock crevices by clever fingers. I even found a gem on a tree stump. But the find which is most damning, the find which forces conviction, the final telltale of conniving and skullduggery—is *this* stone." He held out, on the palm of his hand, a fine blue-white diamond. "All the other stones are raw, uncut dull gems. *But this gem bears the unmistakable form and striations of a lapidary's workmanship.*"

And what *that* meant, Johnny understood at once. Feeling dizzy and lost, he sat back and looked at Strap and Baldy. Their faces betrayed the same thunderstruck dismay in them.

"For a diamond field," King went on, "to yield up so *many* precious stones, and so easily— Well, it's a world-beater. But for a mine to produce stones that're already cut for setting in a lady's ring—that's just too damn much!"

Johnny blurted it out then: "This diamond field was *salted.*"

"Of course," said King.

But it couldn't have been! Johnny raged at himself. *I mean, we shouldn't have been fooled. Consider all the checking up that was done. Shreve and Company offered to buy the first pouch of stones we brought in. Why, they offered $96,000 for that one big stone. Then Mr. Tiffany was willing to pay a quarter-million dollars for a fourth-interest in the field. And Henry Janin, the biggest mining expert in America, said that he could produce $5,000,000 worth of precious stones per acre of this mesa—and that there were 3,000 acres of rich ground—*

"I just can't believe it!" Johnny choked.

Mr. King shrugged. "It's easy for a man to believe what he wants to believe, and difficult for him to accept what he doesn't want to accept. I'm going to send a wire to the San Francisco people who're planning to develop this diamond field, telling them that this great diamond bonanza will not come up to expectations. That it is, in fact, a fraud. A gigantic and unparalleled swindle."

Strap Morgan and Baldy Jones had been sitting as if turned to stone. Strap moved now. He drew his gun from holster.

"No," he said heavily, "you're not."

King stared at Strap Morgan. The geologist's keen eyes flashed with surprise and anger.

"Are you interested in perpetrating a fraud?"

Strap Morgan didn't answer him at all. Strap looked at old Baldy Jones and at Johnny, and Strap said, "We got a half-million dollars comin' to us the minute that Ralston gets a wire from Washington that the new mining law has been passed.

But we won't get that money if this man makes his report." He looked at Mr. King. "So—you ain't sendin' a telegram, Mister. I'm stoppin' you. If I got to shoot you to keep you quiet, I'll sure do it."

Johnny shook his head.

"It's no use, Strap."

Strap Morgan's calm dark eyes, suddenly bleak and hard, studied Johnny. "Don't you make trouble, Johnny. String along with us. It's worth a third of a half-million dollars to you."

"I'm no thief!" Johnny said violently.

And Mr. King said, "I'm a government official. Interfering with me is serious business."

"Not half as serious," Strap said grimly, 'as interfering with me. Baldy, tie 'em up."

And Strap Morgan stood up, pistol leveled and ready.

Baldy Jones hogtied the German cook, and trussed up the geologist, very capably. He started toward Johnny, and hesitated.

"Johnny," Strap said, trying again, "by time we get back to San Francisco, Mr. Ralston may have word that the new minin' laws've gone through. He'll pay us a half-million dollars without a word of argument. We can get on a ship and be 'way out of reach 'fore that money crowd ever finds out this mine ain't what we thought it was."

Johnny's lean young face was pale, but his dark eyes burned with anger and contempt as he demanded, "What you doin' with Mr. King and the cook? Leavin' 'em here hogtied?"

"That's right."

"But, man alive, *nobody* ever comes by this way. They'll likely starve."

"They'll take their chances, we'll take ours."

"You dirty rat," Johnny remarked. "You thievin', lyin', overgrown skunk!"

"Tie 'im up, too, Baldy!"

Baldy started toward Johnny—and recklessly, furiously, Johnny swung at him. Baldy twisted, caught the blow glancingly, and staggered to one side. Strap had been watching alertly; with a swiftness surprising for one of his heft and size, he leaped forward. His gun barrel swept down, caught Johnny alongside the head and stretched him helpless on the ground.

"Tie 'im up, Baldy," Strap Morgan repeated tonelessly.

STRAP and Baldy Jones walked north across the mesa, and down the trail to the brush where they had tied their horses. Mounting, they rode quickly out of sight below the tableland.

Johnny struggled against the ropes binding him. Uselessly.

Mr. King was tugging at his ropes, trying so hard that a vein stood out in a livid Vee on his forehead.

"No use. How about yours?" he gasped.

"Mine are just as tight," Johnny admitted.

Abruptly he started. King, too, jerked his head around to look across the mesa.

"Good Lord, that was a shot!" Johnny gasped.

It had come from the direction in which Strap Morgan and Baldy had ridden off. Johnny stared. Vivid in his mind, suddenly, was a late afternoon some weeks ago. So long past it seemed now. A late afternoon when an unseen killer hid in the brush and shot to annihilate Johnny's whole party.

A horse's hoofs drummed wildly on the ground.

Up the trail from below tore a horseman. It was Baldy Jones. Slung across the saddle in front of him was the heavy figure of Strap Morgan—and Morgan hung in the limp, heavy fashion of an inert and lifeless burden.

Straight into camp Baldy rode, his lean, seamed face wild-eyed with anger and grief. Jumping from horse, he whipped pistol from holster.

"Who shot him? Which one of you did it?" he raged.

"Did what?" Mr. King asked.

"Followed us, shot Strap."

Johnny snapped, "You loco, Baldy? Get hold of yourself. We're all sittin' here just as hogtied as you and Strap left us."

Baldy blinked, composed himself a trifle, passed a trembling hand over his sweating face.

"Then it wasn't one of you hombres. 'Course it wasn't," he breathed. His sun-squinted eyes jerked around to stare over the brushy reach of the mesa, and his lips quivered with panic. "Strap's d-dead," he gulped. "Look at him. I heard the shot. I heard him gasp, and looked around and saw him grabbin' the saddle horn, and then he started keelin' over. I pulled back alongside his horse and caught him, but he was dead already. Look."

He hefted the dead man off the horse. A crimson blotch stained the back of Strap Morgan's shirt.

"But if none of you men did it," Baldy said, "then there's somebody else on this mesa, skulkin' in the brush, and—"

Cra-a-ack!

Somewhere out in the brush, now shadowy with early dusk, a rifle banged out.

Baldy cringed, even Johnny hunched his shoulders in a convulsive tightening.

"Get down! Get down on your belly," Johnny yelled at Baldy Jones. "You'll get hit next."

Baldy flopped down.

"Cut us loose," Johnny cried. "Quick! God'l'mighty, I've seen what that damned killer can do."

And Mr. King said, "Quick, man, get these ropes off us. All of us with guns in our hands can put up a fight, but as long as we're tied up here—"

"We'll get knocked off like sitting rabbits," Johnny finished. "Damn you, Baldy, cut us loose!"

Baldy's fist was so shaky he could hardly open his clasp knife. But he did get it open, and he crawled to Johnny's side and cut the lariat binding him; and Johnny snatched the knife from him and freed Mr. King and then the cook.

"Now we got to scatter into the brush," Johnny snapped, taking command. "We'll separate, and stay hidden until it's dark. Then work down the trail to the railroad. We'll all meet at Rawlins. Keep your guns cocked. Don't shoot unless you see that damned killer—then let 'im have it. Now scatter! Hide in the brush with your back against a boulder and don't move till it's dark."

They vanished into the chaparral. Johnny delayed. He bent over Strap Morgan's body. Maybe the man was still breathing? No. He was dead, all right.

"Good Lord! Why—"

A rifle cracked. And Johnny heard Mr. King, the geologist, gasp out a pain-tortured noise and heard the brush thresh as he sprawled. Still Johnny delayed, bent over Strap Morgan's body. And the surprise on Johnny's face gave way to grim, stubborn resolve.

Abruptly he turned and flung himself down under the brush.

"King!" he called. "You hurt bad'?"

"No. Flesh wound. Watch out for yourself, youngster!"

Again a rifle spoke, and a slug whipped through the sumac clump. Johnny crawled deeper into the thicket, and set his back against a dirt bank. Rifle extended before him, he waited.

ABRUPTLY that ambusher's rifle spoke again; and on the heel of the report a man groaned heavily—not loudly, as of a man slightly hurt but with the full, fainting, deep-drawn agony of a man stricken. It was the geologist's cook, Peffer. Mr. King called to him, but the cook did not answer at all.

That shot had sounded closer, this time. Across camp, Johnny caught the faint blue of powder smoke lifting into the air from a dense clump of greasewood.

"King," Johnny called. "Baldy! That clump of greasewood opposite camp—pile some slugs into it."

And Johnny levered his repeating rifle,

putting four bullets into that clump as fast as he could shoot.

Nevertheless, the killer's gun whipped answer—from left of that brush thicket. Johnny flattened out, hugged the ground, clung to it, trying to merge himself with the very dust. And as he lay there, fingers clawing into the dirt, he realized suddenly that no one else of his party was shooting any more. Besides himself, no one had whipped slugs into that greasewood clump. As if he alone could still jump to his feet, as if he alone was still able to think and shoot.

The swift dusk thickened almost abruptly into night, and there was no more shooting.

Johnny started working through the brush toward the trail off the mesa. When he reached the road that slanted down off the tableland, he realized that the ambusher might be waiting here, to stop whoever would try to slip past.

But the night was very dark. *Maybe he thinks he's already got us all. I've got to take a chance!*

Crouching low, keeping himself against the blackness under the brush, Johnny moved stealthily down the trail to the valley below the piney ridge. Toward the Rawlins station on the railroad he headed.

IT WAS daybreak by the time he reached the Union Pacific tracks. As he neared the Rawlins station he reflected that there would be a train at mid-morning which he could board. He looked for the geologist as he approached the station; he looked for Baldy Jones, and for the German cook. He saw none of them. *What I want to do is get a posse off that train to go back to the mesa with me,* he decided. *Maybe Baldy or King is bad' hurt but can be pulled through. We'll look for tracks of that ambusher and we'll follow him clear to——*

Johnny turned into the doorway of the station, and stopped short. A yell swelled in his throat. There across the room, slumped wearily into a chair, was the geologist, King! His spectacled face was shadowed and gaunt; a rough bandage plaiding his shoulder was stained with red.

He jumped up at sight of Johnny, and came forward, smiling, to grasp Johnny's hand.

"So you got through, too, lad! I was afraid I was the only one."

"Your cook—he's dead?"

"No. Badly hurt." King's face was grim again. "When the train pulls in, we'll get help and go back to the mesa and look for Paul and for Baldy Jones."

Johnny slumped down on the bench beside King's chair.

What now?" he pondered. *Leaving here, where should he go? Back to San Francisco? And be accused by Ralston and his associates of being a crook? Be accused by Marcia Tarrant of being one of the men who killed her father? Be held for investigation of the murder of that detective who'd been throttled in his hotel room?*

Footsteps crunched on the gravel outside the station.

Mr. King looked up. Johnny tensed.

A man loomed into the doorway. Entered. "Baldy Jones!" the geologist exclaimed.

Baldy Jones had always been thin and gaunt and seamed of face; but now weariness was like a shriveling blight upon him. He limped as he came across the room, and Johnny saw that blood was caked upon his pants leg and boot.

"You got hit, too. Is it bad?"

"Not too bad. Lord, I'm pooped."

"I'm sure glad you got through," Johnny said breathlessly. "I'm sure glad you're here."

Far down the track, a train whistle hooted.

Mr. King stood up. "Here it comes. Now we'll get help."

Again the whistle shrieked and brakes clamped down. With a deafening hiss of steam and slamming of iron the train inched to a stop. The conductor jumped

down and stumped officiously along the track.

Mr. King stopped him and told him quickly of the fight on the mesa, finishing, "So I need men to go back with us."

The stout conductor pursed his lips and pulled at his chin.

"I got a company doctor aboard, and a bunch of section hands. They could go to the mesa with you. But we got no guns. You ought to have a sheriff's posse to hunt down that killer."

"No," said Johnny, "we don't need a posse."

Mr. King looked at him; the conductor stared at him.

"What d'you mean, boy?"

"We don't need to go hunt that killer. That killer," Johnny said, whirling, "is right here."

As he spoke, Johnny lunged headlong —at Baldy Jones. The lanky old prospector was snatching at the pistol in his belt. But Johnny's fist swung hard. Caught Baldy on the point of the jaw and knocked him sprawling onto his back in the dust. Johnny pounced on him, wrenched the six-gun from Baldy's fist—and as Baldy sprang erect, Johnny swung the gun, brought the barrel down onto the man's head and laid him senseless on the ground.

"Hold him," Johnny panted. "He's dangerous."

"STRAP MORGAN is really to blame. Morgan was the brains and guts of the outfit. Baldy Jones just came along. In the end, Baldy got panicky. Here's how it was—"

Mr. William Ralston's inner office at the Bank of California was crowded. Johnny, his lean young face excited, was talking. Listening to him were tall Asbury Harpending, General David Colton and General Dodge, Mr. Lent and Mr. Rubery and the geologist, Clarence King. They listened in rigid, angry quiet.

"The diamond field *was* salted, as Mr. King says," Johnny continued. "Salted by Strap Morgan and Baldy Jones and a lapidary whose help they needed—a little man with red hair streaked with gray, Lewis Tarrant. Well, they were up on the mesa, busy making a diamond mine out of barren ground, when my prospecting party came along. Strap Morgan and Baldy saw that my outfit was studying the country, looking for 'color' as we moved along. Strap realized that we'd find their 'diamond mine,' and ruin their plans. They were panicky, and the only thing Strap

Morgan could figure to do was kill us off. So they ambushed us, Strap doin' most of the shootin'. They found me nigh dead, out of my head, and Strap decided that I could be a lot of use to them. They gave me water and bandaged my hurt—and when I came to, they told me they'd found diamonds in my hand. They pretended that *I* had stumbled onto a diamond field. By following the trail I'd made when crawlin' along, loco from thirst and loss of blood, they back-tracked right to the mesa, and the gems they'd salted into the ground. Me, I natur'ly thought it was the real McCoy. So I brought Strap and Baldy here to you men with our story of a diamond field."

"But those were real stones you brought us," Mr. Ralston said, angry and bewildered.

"Yes—and no."

"Shreve and Company wanted to buy that whole pouch of gems you brought. They offered $96,000 for just one large stone!"

"Just the same, the field is a gyp—though the stones are genuine," Johnny

said. "I'll explain it just as Baldy Jones told it all to me in jail last night. I promised I'd try to get him some leniency. Y'see, Strap Morgan worked as an assistant bookkeeper for the Diamond Drill Company of California. The outfit sells diamond-pointed rock drills to mine owners. Occasionally they would call in a lapidary to examine some of their stones. That lapidary was the only first class gem expert in San Francisco. Lewis Tarrant I'm talking about. He and Strap Morgan got acquainted.

"Strap was interested in diamonds. He studied up on them. He asked Tarrant slews of questions. Lewis Tarrant got his gem-cutting training in Belgium and the Hatton Gardon shops of London. He was probably one of the two or three *real* gem experts in America. He told Strap Morgan a lot. And Strap concocted the big swindle.

"Strap and Baldy had sold a gold claim not long before, and they had cash. They went to Europe and bought rough, precious stones — diamonds and emeralds and rubies. Most of them flawed, I guess. By accident, a cut stone was mixed in the lot. The diamonds were of that off-color sort used in pointing rock drills. So you see, the diamonds were *real,* sure enough. But in the European market you can buy such culls a damn sight cheaper than fine stones.

"So that pouch of stones we brought to you, Mr. Ralston, and which Shreve and Company offered to buy, and offered $96,000 for just the one large stone—Baldy says that he and Strap paid only $12,000 for the whole batch."

"But Tiffany was convinced of the value of the stones!" General Colton protested. "He offered to pay a quarter-million dollars for a fourth interest in the diamond mine."

Johnny nodded. "Yeah. But Mr. Tiffany began life as a peddler of gimcracks. He was fooled. He knew no more about uncut gems than Shreve and Co."

"But Henry Janin is no fool," Ralston put in.

"Of course not. But consider," Johnny said reasonably. "Janin was told that Shreve and Company and Mr. Tiffany had declared the stones to be of great value. Henry Janin didn't go to the mesa to see if there were any diamonds there. Oh, no. Everybody was already taking that for granted. He went there just to estimate the extent of pay rock and the mining techniques that would be required to work the field. Remember that, geologically, that mesa has the right soil formations for producing diamonds. Lewis Tarrant helped Strap Morgan find just the right kind of ground.*

"Tarrant helped Morgan in various ways. When Strap and Baldy and I went to the mesa and first 'discovered' the diamonds, it was Tarrant who hid out in the brush and shot at us—to make me think that the killer was somebody who'd shoot at Strap and Baldy just as he'd shot at my original party. Though Tarrant helped Morgan and Baldy, in the end he caused them so much panic they killed him. Y'see, Tarrant didn't have a lot of faith in the swindle. He wanted to be paid off immediately. A dollar in the hand was worth a hundred dollars in prospects, to him. Strap Morgan *did* pay him some money. But finally, to shut him up, they killed him. Which brought them more trouble.

"Tarrant's daughter found a note from Strap Morgan and money Morgan had paid her father. She finally went to the police, and they sent men to find us. One detective walked into the suite of rooms we'd taken at the Parker House—and Strap Morgan choked him to death. At the time, I didn't even know Strap was in the hotel."

Johnny paused, caught his breath in a long, shaky sigh.

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*Johnny's explanation as to why Shreve and Company and Mr. Tiffany and the noted engineer, Mr. Henry Janin, were fooled is the only reasonable explanation that history has to offer. Afterwards, Mr. Janin went over the mesa with Clarence King and realized the truth for himself. But on his first visit he was carried away with excitement, as the others had been. They believed what they wanted to believe. It took the cool scientist, Clarence King, to prick the bubble.

"But Strap Morgan is dead now, Johnny?" Ralston asked.

"Yes. Baldy Jones killed him."

"When did you first get suspicious of your partners?"

"Much too late. I wasn't sure until this last trip to the mesa."

"What became of the men of your first party who were shot?"

"Baldy says that Tarrant buried them that first night."

"Baldy is awfully obliging. Why?" asked Ralston.

"Because I pinned Strap Morgan's murder on him, and Baldy is hoping he can get a life sentence by talking."

"Baldy Jones killed his own partner?"

"Yes, he did. Here's what happened: Returning to the mesa, we found Mr. King there, and King revealed that he knew the diamond field was *salted*. Strap Morgan and Baldy held us up, then. Hogtied us. And started back. Strap said he intended to get that half-million dollar payment out of you, Mr. Ralston.

"They hadn't ridden a quarter mile away when a rifle blazed out. And presently Baldy Jones came riding back with Strap's body, and Baldy was all wild-eyed. He accused us of having shot Strap in the back.

But we were still hogtied. Which meant that there must be *somebody else* on the mesa, shooting from ambush. A bullet went off, then, out in the brush, as if that ambusher was starting to pop at us. We all scattered, to escape—and that gunman kept shooting at us.

"The gunman was Baldy Jones himself."

"But how about that shot from the brush?"

"It was a trick Baldy used to bolster his yarn. He had wrapped a cartridge in a thick wad of paper and set fire to it. The cartridge fin'ly exploded. And when we scattered into the brush, Baldy himself kept shooting at us to build his alibi up strong."

"Alibi for what?"

"For murdering his partner."

"But why? Why should he have killed Strap Morgan?"

"Baldy was scared," Johnny said. "It was Strap Morgan who had the brains and guts of the outfit. Baldy was afraid to go back to San Francisco. Afraid that Marcia Tarrant would pin her father's murder on him and Strap. So Baldy shot Strap—and took Strap's share of that money you paid us for the pouch of gems. With that $100,000, Baldy planned to go back to the Tennessee hills he came from. Baldy was smart, but not quite smart enough. He made one mistake and that tripped him up."

"What mistake?"

"When Baldy brought Strap's body back to us, and accused one of us of having shot Strap from a distance—*I noticed that Strap Morgan's shirt was marked with bad powder burns.* The gun that killed him had been *right at his back.* So I realized that Baldy was lying. There could be only one reason for that. Baldy himself had shot Strap Morgan. Baldy's alibi busted down right there."

"Thanks to you," Mr. Ralston said soberly. "And thanks to you, my boy, we are saved much greater loss. The mining laws have been amended so that we could take legal claim to a diamond mine—and I would have paid Morgan that half-million dollars."

Harpending demanded violently, "*Now* what do we do? How about the San Francisco and New York Mining and Commercial Company? How about all the offices we've opened—and the two million dollars that've already been subscribed for stock?"

"We will dissolve the company," was Ralston's emphatic answer. "Every dollar will be refunded. I personally will be responsible for every penny paid out and lost.* We're shrewd men, all of us—bankers and promoters and army officers and

*Wm. Ralson did just that. He allowed no one, not even his millionaire associates, to suffer loss because of the diamond hoax.

engineers—but a couple of horny-handed prospectors would have cheated us out of millions and made us crooks who cheated the public out of still more millions, if this courageous youngster here hadn't taken a hand." He turned to Johnny. "Lad, the money we paid you as your share of the price of that first pouch of gems—I want you to keep it. I'll put the sum down to insurance. And if you want a job here, or on the Comstock, come to me. I'll make room for you even if I have to move over at my own desk!"

Johnny swallowed hard. "Th-thanks," he said.

JOHNNY sought out Marcia Tarrant. She had secured a position as governess in an army officer's family. Johnny went to the officer's home. Marcia tensed with hostility when she opened the door and saw him.

"Let me talk to you a minute," Johnny said hastily. "It's important."

She led him into the parlor.

"Miss Tarrant, I'm working for the Bank of California as a mining engineer. I've come to settle a debt the bank owes your father."

Her blue eyes widened. "The *bank*—"

"Yes." He spoke on quickly, lying with all his ingenuity as he went along. "We hired your father in a very confidential capacity, to evaluate a large shipment of gems which an importer was offering the bank as security for a loan. To put it briefly, without your father's expert counsel, we would have loaned out hundreds of thousands of dollars on gems not worth one-twentieth of the sum involved. The whole transaction was just a swindle to victimize the bank. Your father saved us. He warned us that the gems were imperfect culls. We didn't lend the money—and we are thereby indebted to your father for protection against a very damaging loss."

"That's strange. I'd heard nothing of it?"

"Because the matter was handled with great discretion! A bank can't afford to let the public know how easily it can be swindled. Now your father was to receive as his fee a certain percentage of the sum involved. We did pay him $2,000 as part of the money. There is a matter of some $5,000 still owing him. Naturally, we must now pay it to you. So—here is a check, which I present with the sympathy of the bank for your father's untimely death."

Marcia was staring at him, her lovely eyes wide and round. She had hardly heard his last words.

"You m-mean," she gasped, "that dad—he *wasn't* doing something dishonest, after all?"

"Good Lord, no!" Johnny said as vehemently as if he believed it. "In fact, your father probably died just because he *was* so honest. In spite of threats and offers of bribes, he honestly appraised those gems. We suspect that the swindling dealer had your father—removed. In fact, we've seized one of the crooks, who will soon go to prison. I can't tell you how much our firm respects the courage and honesty your father showed in the matter."

Tears welled in Marcia's eyes.

"I'm glad," she breathed. "Oh, I'm so glad . . ."

Johnny gazed at her, realizing that it was costing him a lot of money to tell Marcia Tarrant this whooping lie. But it was worth it. Obviously Tarrant had been good to his daughter. Let the evil Tarrant had done be interred with his bones, and the good live ever after.

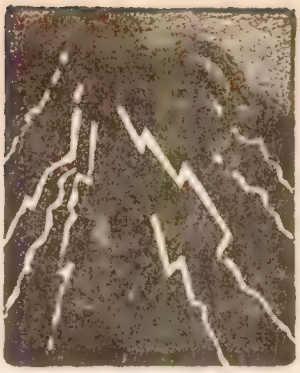
Johnny got up to go.

"May I come see you again?" he asked.

"Oh, I hope you will!" she said.

And Johnny walked away with a shine in his eyes and a song in his heart, like a man possessed of wealth beyond dreams, of bars of gold and pounds of rubies and diamonds by the keg.

Adventurers All



Lunatics' Dance

MY MEMORIES of those early years in the insane asylum are pretty foggy, especially the first two. After that some incidents stand out with startling clarity. Like that dance. The vagueness of those first two years was not due to any wooziness of the intellect—I was no crazier then than I am now. I was just younger. Much younger. Less than a year old, in fact. My father, who was an officer of the institution, took me there at that tender age. Being brought up in a community where most of the people are demented is a bizarre way to start life, but that is the way I started.

We lived in the administration building, which was flanked on each side by wings which housed the patients. The first and second floors of those were occupied by the relatively mild patients; the third was heavily barred and held the ultra-dangerous maniacs, the men in one wing, the women in the other.

The fact that a person was not quite right in the head meant little to us who lived with them. Our servants—the cooks, the waiters, the barber, the hostlers and the coachmen—were all patients, even the children's nurses. The only strictly sane paid help were the attendants and a few technicians. We knew, of course, that certain patients were likely to go off on tangents—particularly the epileptics—but we were schooled to know their touch-off points and carefully avoided them.

The average citizen does not have to be told that psychotics are queer. They react in the most unexpected fashion. There was a woman there who sat for months, placidly sewing, but let her sight a little child and she began raving. She had been a farm-wife and came up out of the field one day to find her home blazing. Her three tiny children perished in that fire. We had a man, committed for butchering his wife with an axe for no good reason the night after they were married. He was released as cured, after five years of confinement during which his behavior was perfect. Shortly after he married again. While on his honeymoon he decapitated his new bride. Immediately he was back with us—for life. Insane people are like that. If left alone, or nursed along, they are perfectly tractable. If the particular thing that touches them off happens to occur—well, then, you have something else.

Part of the institution's routine was a weekly dance. It was always held on Friday nights. Behind the administration building there was a service building. On the first floor of it was the main kitchen, the bakery, the laundry, and a carpenter shop. In the back was the powerhouse, which furnished us with light and steam. The whole upstairs, approached by a narrow stairway that came up right in the

middle, was a dance hall. I cannot remember whether the building had a mansard roof, a pyramidal roof, or an ordinary hip roof, but I do remember—very, very distinctly—that it was a tin roof, supported by trusses, and that there was no ceiling overhead.

Every Friday night there was a dance. A four-piece orchestra came out from town —San Antonio, Texas—and also a few residents of that place who were not terrified at the idea of mingling with maniacs. All the officers of the asylum and their families, the doctors, the attendants, and the milder patients attended. It was the gala night of an otherwise dull week. The children went, too, because in those days they danced mostly what were called the "square dances" in which they could participate, such as the Virginia Reel, minuets and such. The adults waltzed about every third number, and once or twice during the evening they would perform the then novelty of the two-step.

ONE Friday we had such a dance. It started off well. There were probably a hundred or more of the patients present, and a score or so of sane people, counting children. The dance went well until about ten o'clock. Then things began to happen.

It rained. It rained more. And then it set in to rain in earnest. It must be understood here and now that a south Texas rainstorm is in a class apart. In some sections it may go for a year or more without a drop of rainfall. Then, one day, a black cloud will appear and dump a whole year's quota of precipitation on the place in one or two hours. That was the kind of rain it was, and with drops as big as buckshot. The noise of them falling on that tin roof was deafening. The orchestra stopped, for there was no use of going on. Some of the patients showed signs of agitation, and when the lightning began to flare and the thunder rumble, the responsible persons present began to look apprehensive and whisper to one another. It would not do to submit such temperamental people as were present too long to such a strain.

The lights went out. We did not know it then, but already ten inches or more of rain had fallen; the boiler room was flooded up to the level of the grate-bars. The boiler fires were extinguished, and when they went out, the generators died. Everybody held their breath. In the pitch black darkness and beneath that terrible, unremitting din, the superintendent's wife, my mother, and the other mothers rounded up their children and herded us off to a far corner, where they formed a sort of phalanx about us to guard us from the wild panic that everybody thought was sure to follow. I remember vaguely being patted on the back and having my hair smoothed and told to be quiet and not cry out, no matter what happened.

In the meantime my father and the superintendent, Dr. W. W. MacGregor, both big and husky men, found their way to the head of the staircase and stood on guard. The attendants circulated among the huddled patients, saying soothing words. No one had the slightest inkling what to expect. The majority of those present were insane people, unstable in every emotional way. There was simply no knowing how they would react. There was no precedent for the situation.

Things looked bad, but they got speedily worse. It began to hail. The roar on the roof turned into a racket that is indescribable. It was as if ten thousand snare-drums had cut loose into a single prolonged ruffle. There was a seemingly interminable stretch of that. Then all of a sudden all was quiet. The cloudburst had done its worst. It was over. Absolute silence reigned.

Scouts were sent down the stairs and came back to report that the place was flooded to knee-depth. That was bad news, too. The patients must be got back to their wards. By some miracle they had not rioted or tried to bolt from the hall.

But to subject them to wading back to their dormitories in the middle of the night was inviting disaster. There was a consultation.

One by one attendants carried them piggy-back across the several hundred feet intervening between the buildings. One by one they were locked up. I hate to let you down.

Nothing happened! Those lunatics were so delighted, so invigorated, so pepped-up by that delightful, stimulating night that was so different from ordinary nights that they went to their beds cackling with joy, clapping their hands, and wishing for another like it.

No sane person present, whether infant or senile, ever forgot it. It, for me, was my first trying moment.

Malcolm Jameson.

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In the next issue

SHORT STORIES *for November 25th*

Vanity—that was what made men cut notches on their guns and boast of their prowess. But sometimes things didn't work out that way.

NOTCHES ON HIS GUN

A novelette in the next

SHORT STORIES *by*

WILLIAM MacLEOD RAINE

"You Can't Eat Glory"

No, that's a fact; many other things come first on a rationed diet.

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

"King Lee's Death Drum"

If its relentless rhythm should die, so would a man.

By WALTER C. BROWN

"Trouble on the Fly"

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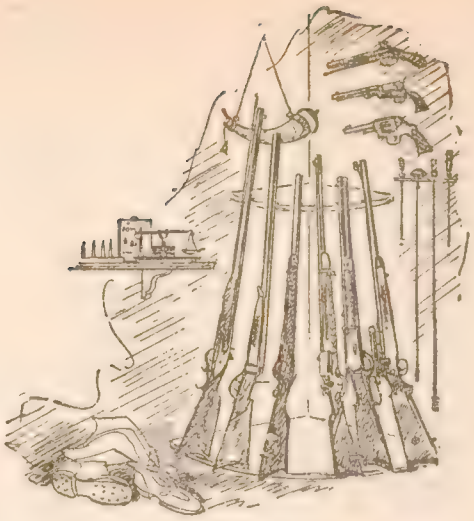

More About the Spencer

EDITOR: I have read your department in SHORT STORIES every issue since it began, and generally I read it the first thing upon getting the magazine, for I love firearms; used to visit the U. S. Armory at Springfield, Mass., often when I was a boy, qualified as a sharpshooter in the Massachusetts Naval Militia, and after the Spanish-American war became a clerk in the U. S. Armory, and on my farm in Maryland from 1912 to 1918 I was quite proficient with a .22 Winchester repeater.

Your article on the Spencer Repeater is especially interesting to me, and I wish to comment on your statement that "It was used only to arm the cavalry and mounted infantry."

My father, James L. Bowen, of Springfield, Mass., published his "History of the Thirty-seventh Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteers, in the Civil War of 1861-1865" in 1884, while records and memories were still fresh. When Gen. Early in July, 1864, was raiding toward Baltimore and Washington, the Sixth Corps, in which was the 37th Mass. Infantry, was hurriedly rushed from the trenches near Petersburg, Va., and brought by boat to Washington, D. C., arriving in time to participate in the battle of Fort Stevens, one of the defenses of Washington, where President Lincoln was present. You may be interested in his account of the arming of the Thirty-seventh with the Spencer, which took place on July 14, 1864; the second day after the battle:

The regiment was detailed as rear guard for the trains next day, the 14th, and as consequently it did not march till afternoon the early part of the day witnessed an important change in its equipment. The Springfield rifle muskets with which the men had been armed from the first were now turned in to Lieutenant Smith, ordnance officer for the regiment, and in their place an issue was made of the Spencer repeating rifle, or "seven-shooters," as they were familiarly termed. This was a new weapon of the magazine breech-loading order, with which but few regiments in the Army of the Potomac and none in the Sixth Corps had thus far been armed. While the regiment was marching through Washington toward Fort Stevens, the chief ordnance officer came to greet Colonel Edwards, and in the course of the conversation asked if he could do anything for him. "Yes," was the reply, "you can arm Colonel Montague's regiment with the Spencer rifle." "Make out your requisition for them and I will see that you get them," was the response. Within twenty-four hours the quartermaster had carried the papers to Headquarters, and with wonderful promptness the demand had been honored.

This new rifle was undoubtedly at that time the most formidable weapon that could be placed in the hands of infantry. Though somewhat shorter than the Springfield, it had wonderful range, shooting with accuracy and immense force. It used metallic cartridges and the method of loading was comparatively simple, as was necessary for successful use in the field. A tin tube containing a strong spiral spring held the cartridges, and this being thrust into place in the breech of the gun, the operation of the breech mechanism caused the upper cartridge to be pushed into the barrel ready for firing. The piece was cocked and fired in the usual manner. The guard being pulled down opened the breech of the gun and threw out the exploded shell,

being returned to its place the gun was closed and the spring in the tube threw another cartridge into the barrel, when the piece was ready to be cocked and fired again, and so on till the last cartridge in the tube was used. Then the reloading occupied no more time than the placing of a single charge in a muzzle-loading weapon. With this construction it will be readily seen that the Spencer rifle in actual service was a great improvement upon the muzzle-loader, especially in "tight places" and the men of the Thirty-seventh were not a little flattered that they were the first in the Sixth Corps to be thus armed. They were not long in learning, however, that the repeater required a vastly increased supply of ammunition. The former complement had been 40 rounds, in place of which they were now expected to carry 100, and on some of the tedious marches that followed words of complaint more expressive than elegant were apt to be heard, and it is to be feared that sometimes the bundles of cartridges were surreptitiously lightened.

The weapon with which the Thirty-seventh now found itself equipped, and which was one of the most important pioneers in the revolution of modern small arms, was the invention of Mr. C. M. Spencer, at that time a young mechanic in the employ of the Cheney Brothers, the noted silk manufacturers of South Manchester, Ct. Mr. Spencer had been experimenting and developing his idea from 1857 and in 1860 produced the first working gun. The time was opportune, if not even providential; the first mutterings of the rebellion were giving notice of the storm to come. The importance of the invention was manifest to any intelligent observer of the national situation and through the influence of a member of the Cheney firm a company was organized at Boston for the manufacture of the rifle. A part of the Chickering piano manufactory was leased for work-shops and half a million dollars was expended in furnishing stock and machinery.

Mr. Spencer meantime was making diligent efforts to bring his invention to the attention of the proper national authorities, and finally a test was arranged at the Washington Navy Yard where 1,000 rounds were fired to show the capacity of the new claimant for official favor.

During this test 21 shots were fired in 62 seconds, and the Secretary of the Navy was so favorably impressed that he gave an order for 1,000 of the rifles for trial in actual service on shipboard. During 1861 the number ordered amounted to 10,000, but their use was still confined to the navy. Gradually, as it was seen that they were valuable in this limited field, they came into use among cavalry and mounted infantry, the western armies being the first to use any considerable number. During the Tennessee campaign of Rosecrans against Bragg in 1863, the Spencer rifle received commendation, but it was not until the following spring that it became known among the infantry of the Army of the Potomac, one of the first regiments to adopt it being the Pennsylvania Bucktails who took it at the opening of the Wilderness campaign instead of the Sharpe rifles which they had previously used.

A rifle made for the purpose was presented to President Lincoln in August, 1863, by Mr. Spencer, who relates interestingly the almost boyish eagerness with which the President on a subsequent day in his presence examined and tested "the machine" in the White House grounds. The target made by Mr. Lincoln on that occasion—a piece of pine board six by eight inches with a black spot in the center—is preserved in the military museum at Springfield, Ill. Every bullet went through the "bull's eye," and a memorandum in pencil on the board says the target was made by seven consecutive shots at a distance of 40 yards.

Altogether 200,000 Spencer rifles were made, and it is worthy of remark that every one was an exact duplicate of all the others. Practical tests in actual service did not suggest a single change from the original model in the way of improvement.*

The Spencer rifles proved their value in the hands of the Thirty-seventh Massachusetts Infantry, composed of men from western Massachusetts' farms, hills and woods, accustomed to use of rifles for killing game with a minimum of ammunition, in the autumn campaign of 1864 in the Shenandoah Valley which resulted in driving General Early from the valley, then in the winter around Petersburg, Va., and finally established its tremendous superiority in the terrific fighting at Sailors Creek, just before Appomattox, when the Thirty-seventh became separated from other regiments and was assailed in front and rear by superior forces but came off victorious,

* Those who carried the Spencer rifle during the war will be interested to know that Mr. Spencer has recently established at Windsor, Ct., a factory where the rifle in an improved and still more efficient form is made. It has recently been introduced to leading military powers throughout the world and very favorably received, and it is safe to predict that it is destined to win still higher place among the destructive enginery of modern warfare. The same principle has also been applied to shotguns with marked success.

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capturing over its own number of prisoners, including the Confederate generals Ewell, Kershaw, Custis Lee and three other generals. It was not only a superb proof of the advantages of a repeating rifle, but convincing proof of its excellence in battle after passing through a long winter of exposure to all sorts of weather, storms, mud and snow and ice.

I saw and handled one of these Spencers, belonging to a member of this regiment, who purchased the rifle from the government at the time of his discharge after the termination of hostilities.

Please pardon this lengthy letter—but your article was immensely interesting; I couldn't help sending this. I think my father obtained much of his information direct from Mr. Spencer himself, who lived only a few miles away, in Connecticut. Confederate shrapnel on the third day at Gettysburg wounded my father in both legs, ending his active soldiering.

H. D. B. asked you, "Were they any good?" I've seen the eyes of veterans of the Thirty-seventh shine when they told *how* good they were. Alas! everyone of them has now passed over, I think.

Very truly yours,

Florida. *F. H. B.*

The STORY TELLERS' CIRCLE

All the North Is a Gamble

WITH this issue we start another epic novel of the North by James B. Hendryx. It is a worthy successor to "Oak and Iron," "Gold and the Mounted," "Edge of Beyond," all of which novels appeared in the pages of SHORT STORIES, and later became successful books. "Gambler's

Chance" will also be published later on as a $2.00 book.

Hendryx has a vast knowledge of the North of the Yukon and the fabulous days of the Klondike strikes of '98. As well as a good story his yarns contain vivid pictures of the strenuous conditions of the times, of the men who met them, of the young Canadian Northwest Mounted Police—the Law of the North—of blizzard and ice hazard and above all of the spirit of the hectic days of a Northern gold rush. All this is back of "Gambler's Chance," and we are proud of the story and of Hendryx's long association with SHORT STORIES.

That Word Rodeo

IN THIS issue Omar Barker has a poem, *Four-Footed Dynamite.* Along with it to our desk came this note:

The correct Spanish pronunciation of rodeo is roe-tháy-oh, some well-meanin' folks call it roe-áay-oh, but amongst the cowhands themselves it's just ró-de-o, which is the way to pronounce it in my poem. *S. Omar Barker.*

A Great American Bonanza

GEORGE ARMIN SHAFTEL writes us that his amazing story in this issue about an American diamond hoax is based on fact. His letter says that:

William Ralston, Harpending, General Dodge and General Colton, Mr. Rubery and Mr. Lent and the great geologist, Clarence King, played substantially the roles in real life which are given to them in my yarn. The two crooks, however, were *not;* named Morgan and Jones though, in other respects, the story records their actions with fair accuracy—with another qualification. They did *not* shoot anybody, though they did claim to have shot an Indian who first revealed the diamond field to them. And their ends were not as here stated. Baldy Jones (which was not his name) collected $100,000 from Ralston's associates—and disappeared. Was never seen or heard from

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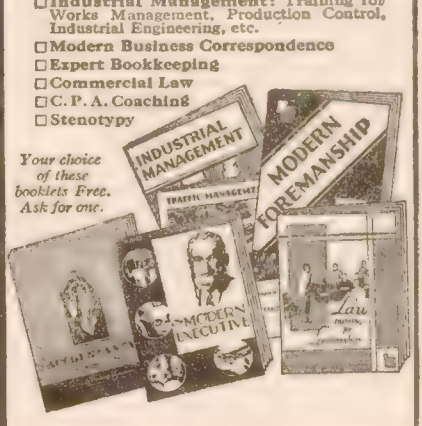

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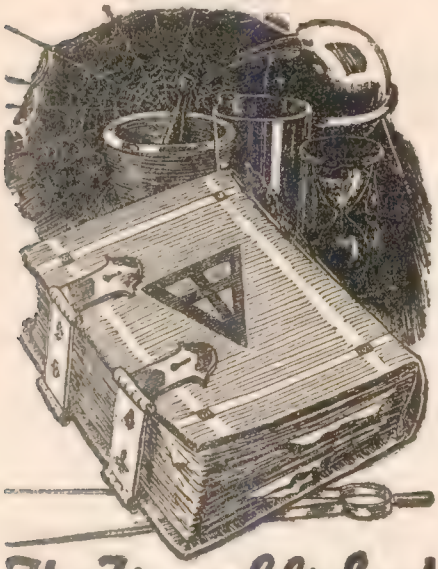

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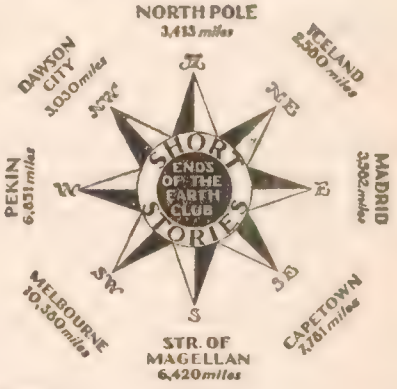
again. Some rumors say he was killed by the men he gypped, but there is no proof of that. Strap Morgan stuck with his swindle to the bitter end, and collected more than a half-million from Ralston's associates. Then he returned to Kentucky. When Clarence King revealed the swindle, some of Ralston's partners tried to recover the money paid Morgan. But the Governor of Kentucky refused to extradite Morgan. Finally Morgan paid back $150,000 of his loot. Morgan set himself up as a banker. There was another bank in his home town. Morgan got into a quarrel with the other bankers. Within a year after Morgan went home with his more than $500,000 of cash, he died abruptly from a charge of shotgun slugs in the back. —*George Shaftel.*

THE ENDS OF THE EARTH CLUB



HERE is a free and easy meeting place for the brotherhood of adventurers. To be one of us, all you have to do is register your name and address with the Secretary, Ends-of-the-Earth Club, c/o Short Stories, Inc., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Your handsome membership - identification card will be sent you at once. There are no dues—no obligations.

Mexico Members—Please Note

Dear Secretary:

I am 21 years of age and have been collecting stamps for several years. I would like to join your Ends of the Earth Club.

I read your column in every issue and enjoy writing to the members. I would like to hear from someone in Mexico, however, I will answer any letters I may receive.

J. L. Lewis.

c/o The Texas Co.,
P. O. Box 581,
Port Arthur, Texas.

Interested in Spanish

Dear Secretary:

Please register me as a member of the Ends of the Earth Club. I am 23 years old and interested in corresponding with people everywhere—especially anyone who could help me learn a little Spanish.

Thanking you, I remain,

Route 1, *A. Herman.*
Springport, Mich.

STATEMENT OF THE OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, CIRCULATION, ETC., required by the Act of Congress of August 24, 1912, and March 3, 1933, of SHORT STORIES, published twice a month, at New York, N. Y., for October 1, 1941, State of New York, County of New York, ss.

Before me, a Notary Public in and for the State and county aforesaid, personally appeared William J. Delaney, who, having been duly sworn according to law, deposes and says that he is the President-Treasurer of the SHORT STORIES, INC., owners of SHORT STORIES, and that the following is, to the best of his knowledge and belief, a true statement of the ownership, management, (and if a daily paper, the circulation), etc., of the aforesaid publication for the date shown in the above caption, required by the Act of August 24, 1912, embodied in section 411, Postal Laws and Regulations, to wit:

1. That the names and addresses of the publisher, editor, managing editor, and business managers are: *Publisher:* SHORT STORIES, INC., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.; *Editor:* D. McIlwraith, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.; *Managing Editor:* None; *Business Manager:* William J. Delaney, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.

2. That the owner is: SHORT STORIES, INC., 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. Stockholders owning or holding one per cent or more of total amount of stock: William J. Delaney, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.

3. That the known bondholders, mortgagees, and other security holders owning or holding 1 per cent or more of total amount of bonds, mortgages, or other securities are: None.

4. That the two paragraphs next above, giving the names of the owners, stockholders, and security holders, if any, contain not only the list of stockholders and security holders as they appear upon the books of the company but also, in cases where the stockholder or security holder appears upon the books of the company as trustee or in any other fiduciary relation, the name of the person or corporation for whom such trustee is acting, is given; also that the said two paragraphs contain statements embracing affiant's full knowledge and belief as to the circumstances and conditions under which stockholders and security holders who do not appear upon the books of the company as trustees, hold stock and securities in a capacity other than that of a bona fide owner; and this affiant has no reason to believe that any other person, association, or corporation has any interest direct or indirect in the said stock, bonds, or other securities than as so stated by him.

(*Signed*) W. J. DELANEY, *President.*

Sworn to and subscribed before me this 22nd day of September, 1941.

[SEAL] H. J. HAGGER.

(*Signed*) H. J. Hagger, Notary Public, Westchester Co. New York County Clerk's No. 617; New York County Register's No. 3H405.

My commission expires March 30, 1943.

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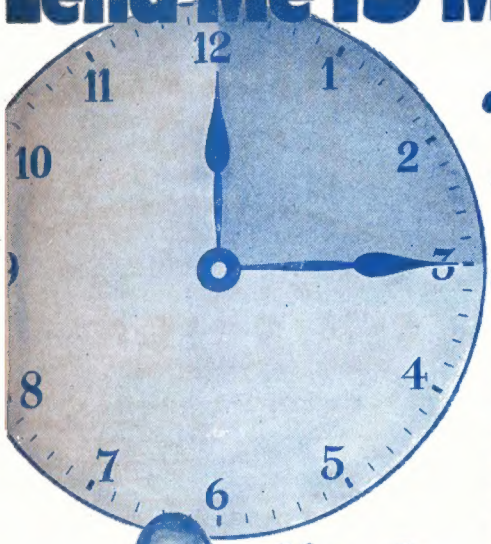

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Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do for You

Are you ALL MAN—tough-muscled, on your toes every minute, with all the up-and-at-'em that can lick your weight in wildcats? Or do you need the help I can give you—the help that has already worked such wonders for other fellows everywhere?

In just 15 minutes a day, right in the privacy of your own home, I'm ready to prove that "Dynamic Tension" can lay a new outfit of solid muscle over every inch of your body. Let me put new, smashing power into your arms and shoulders—give you an armor-shield of stomach muscle that laughs at punches—strengthen your legs into real columns of surging stamina. If lack of exercise or wrong living has weakened you inside, I'll get after that condition, too, and show you how it feels to LIVE!

Actual photo of the man who holds the title, "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man."

Charles Atlas

America's Greatest "Builder of Men"

Among all the physical instructors and "conditioners of men" ONLY ONE NAME STANDS OUT. That name is **Charles Atlas!**

In every part of the country **Charles Atlas** is recognized as "America's Greatest Builder of Men." Almost two million men have written to him. Thousands upon thousands have put their physical development into his capable hands!

And now that the call is for men capable of helping America meet and conquer any national emergency many thousands of others (even those already in their country's Army and Navy) are calling upon Charles Atlas to build the kind of men America vitally needs.

Here's PROOF Right Here!

"Results come so fast by your method that it seems just as if some magician put on the pounds of solid muscle just where you want them!" —**W. L., Missouri**

"Feel like a million dollars and have a 44" normal chest—a 2" GAIN IN 4 DAYS!" —**L. A. S., Illinois**

"My doctor thinks your course is fine. In 15 days have put 2½" on my chest and ½" on my neck." —**B. L., Oregon**

"Your book opened my eyes . . . 1¼" gain on my biceps and 1" more on my chest in two weeks!" —**J. F., Penna.**

FREE THIS FAMOUS BOOK THAT TELLS YOU HOW TO GET A BODY THAT MEN RESPECT AND WOMEN ADMIRE

Almost two million men have sent for and read my book, **"Everlasting Health and Strength."** It tells you exactly what **"Dynamic Tension"** can do. And it's packed with pictures that SHOW you what it does. Results it has produced for other men. RESULTS I want to prove it can get for YOU! If you are satisfied to take a back seat and be pushed around by other fellows week-in, week-out, you don't want this book. But if you want to learn how you can actually become a NEW MAN, right in the privacy of your own home and in only 15 minutes a day, then mail—get this coupon into the mail to me as fast as your legs can get to the letterbox! CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9L, 115 East 23rd Street, New York City.

MAIL THIS COUPON NOW!

CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 9L,
115 East 23rd Street, New York City

I want the proof that your system of **"Dynamic Tension"** will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "Everlasting Health and Strength."

Name.....
(Please Print or Write Plainly)

Address.....

City..... State.....

NEW TRIPLE BENEFIT LOW COST LIFE POLICY INSURES WHOLE FAMILY

COSTS YOU ONLY $1 PER MONTH FOR ALL

AGES 1 TO 80—GRANDPARENTS, WIFE, HUSBAND, CHILDREN

ONE POLICY—ONE SMALL PREMIUM

This Wonderful, New Low Cost, Triple-Benefit Life Insurance Policy protects every member of your family—whether living at home or not—from the smallest child to grandparents—ages 1 to 80. Every member of the P. H. Wall family of North Dakota pictured at the left is covered by their policy. They know that tragedy strikes when it is least expected and desire to be ready for it. The New "Century" Triple-Benefit Family Life Policy comes to your rescue in time of dire need—at a time when cash is badly needed. Send the coupon today—examine the policy on our Free Inspection Offer—no obligation to keep it—**NO AGENT WILL CALL on you AT ANY TIME.**

PAYS UP TO $3,000.00 MAXIMUM

Over half the people in the U. S. A. cannot afford the expense that comes with sudden tragedy in their family. In such a crisis the New "Century" Family Group Policy with its large cash benefits, paying up to $3,000.00 for travel accidental death, is what you need for your own protection and for the protection of your family.

You get life insurance protection for every member of your family against death from **any cause.**

This amazing policy pays for natural or ordinary death, auto accidental death or travel accidental death at a rate so small it is like buying only one postage stamp a day. Less than 3½c a day pays for life insurance for each and every member of your family. You cannot afford to wait until something happens that wipes out your income and savings! Get your New "Century" Family Life Policy now on our 10-Day Free Inspection Offer.

FREE POLICY INSPECTION OFFER

I want you to have this liberal Triple-Benefit Family Life Policy for 10 days without obligation. Read it in your own home. No agent will call—you return it if you are not entirely satisfied. You alone decide. The Pioneer Life Insurance Company is an old reliable Company that has already paid thousands and thousands and thousands of dollars in cash benefits. POLICY IS BACKED BY LEGAL RESERVES. **We will send you facsimile certificate from the State of Illinois showing over $100,000.00 on deposit with Illinois Insurance Department at Springfield, to protect the policy holders.**

NO MEDICAL EXAMINATION

All members of your family from 1 year to 80 are eligible to apply for the Family Policy. Covers husband, wife, children and grandparents in one policy—one small premium. No Medical Examination for anyone. There is no red tape and if you do not find the policy as represented you can send it right back under our printed guarantee.

Send No Money

Just write your name and address plainly on the coupon, then, examine this high paying, quick cash, triple-benefit family policy on our 10-Day Free Inspection Offer. See how it pays cash benefits for each member of your family. Only a limited number to be issued. Act **TODAY**—tomorrow may be too late. Send no money—just mail coupon.

NO AGENT OR COLLECTOR WILL CALL

EXAMINE POLICY ON FREE OFFER

PIONEER LIFE INSURANCE CO.,
Elgin Tower, Dept. P-63-D
Elgin, Ill.

NO AGENT WILL CALL

Please rush without obligation the 10-DAY FREE INSPECTION OFFER and full details of the New "Century" Triple-Benefit Family Life Insurance Policy. Send No Money.

Name.....

Address.....

Town..... State.....